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**Minimalism in Twentieth-Century American Writing**

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PhD

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## ABSTRACT

My PhD thesis identifies a “will to reduction” in twentieth-century American literature as a significant trend that I trace from the Modernist era to the contemporary period. I locate the origins of contemporary literary Minimalism in Modernist experimentation. In an early chapter I identify reductive tendencies and the values informing them in Imagism, Objectivism, and the writings of Ernest Hemingway and William Carlos Williams. These form the foundation for a tradition of American Minimalism, which I then document in contemporary literature. Robert Creeley is an inheritor of the Objectivists’ Minimalist leanings, which recur, by emulation or partial disagreement, in the poetry of Aram Saroyan and Robert Grenier. Raymond Carver renews the Hemingway tradition in his short stories, and one chapter of my thesis considers Carver along with Mary Robison, who has also written a Minimalist novel. Radical, sustained experiments in Minimalism by Robert Lax, Lydia Davis, and David Markson are the subject of subsequent chapters. Their work represents recent versions of Minimalism in poetry, the short story, and the novel. Recurring themes in my thesis are the ways in which some of these authors have been influenced by visual art, and philosophical issues raised by literary experiments in Minimalism.

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Chapter 5 is based on the dissertation on Lydia Davis I submitted for the Issues in Modern Culture M.A. in the English Department at University College London in 2000. The original version has been modified and includes new material.

**m**

## INTRODUCTION

According to Bob Grumman, the poem by Aram Saroyan reproduced on the page before this one is listed as the shortest poem in the world by the *Guinness Book of Records*.<sup>1</sup> As it is presented here, its status as a poem is made explicit. Yet it is the sort of work that one might expect to provoke questions. ‘Is it *really* a poem?’ and ‘How is that a poem?’ are some of the responses it has elicited from people to whom I’ve shown it. Although these reactions might seem naïve, they are in fact just the sort of question such poetry is calculated to evince. These questions would not arise when the same people were handed a copy of a more traditional poem, say, a sonnet. A sonnet would appear self-evidently a poem. Questions might arise about its meaning, its imagery, its rhyme scheme and metre, and the choice of the sonnet form, but that it *is* a poem seems unquestionable.

Saroyan, on the other hand, uses reductive techniques precisely in order to draw attention to the issue of just what it is that makes his poem a poem. The considerations raised with regard to the sonnet—rhyme, metre, imagery, traditional formal structure—do not apply. The question is much more basic than that with Saroyan’s poem. The question seems to be whether the placing of characters in ink on paper is sufficient for writing, and therefore for literature.<sup>2</sup> This is arguably a minimal condition, without which one might claim that poetry cannot even get off the ground. Others who conceive poetry differently, as a matter of sound rather than writing, for example, might employ reduction in another manner in order to test or exemplify their

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<sup>1</sup> Saroyan, *Aram Saroyan* (New York: Random House, 1968); Bob Grumman, ‘Minimalist Poetry: Unacclaimed but Flourishing’ (1997), *Light and Dust Mobile Anthology of Poetry*, <http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/grumman/egrumn.htm>. Accessed 9 September 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Saroyan’s poem resembles the letter ‘m’ in type, but deviates from it. This could be interpreted as suggesting that creative manipulation of writing is essential to poetry. The three-humped ‘m’ is a feature of cursive handwriting, which indicates that we might conceivably think of the poem as an actual letter rather than as a character that resembles one.

concept. The way in which twentieth-century American writers working in different genres employ reduction in a variety of ways to address the question of what is essential in literature is the subject of this thesis.

‘Minimalist’ seems the most appropriate label for this type of writing. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (second edition) attributes the first use of the term ‘minimalist’ to Israel Zangwill in 1907. The example from the author’s *Ghetto Comedies* is as follows: ‘Ah, you’re a Maximalist,’ said the beadle. ‘No’, is the reply, ‘I am only a Minimalist. I merely want the minimum—that we save our own lives.’ The concern with the barest of essentials, the preservation of life, in Zangwill’s quip (which is at once funny and deadly serious) points toward the conceptual basis of a notion of ‘Minimalism’. The minimal is the least possible, that beyond which there can be no further reduction. The practice of Minimalism, then, it would seem, requires an awareness of minimum conditions. What those conditions are depends upon the context in which the notion of Minimalism is invoked. In the example from Zangwill, the avoidance of death may be conceived as the minimum, the essential condition on which life is based. Literary Minimalism is also concerned to seek out an essential condition.

Literary Minimalism may involve a quite general idea of the minimum or essential conditions of literature, but in most cases Minimalism is centred upon more particular requirements. An author may, for example, base his or her Minimalist endeavours on what is absolutely necessary for fiction. Or, he or she may consider the minimum conditions for poetry. Minimalist fiction might explore the minimal requirements in order for there to be a story, and Minimalist poetry assume as essential rhythm, or the image. Even more specifically, literary Minimalism can be based on the least possible requirements of a genre such as the novel, or an epic poem.

With different genres come different minimum conditions. Whatever the focus, as Warren Motte says in his recent book on Minimalism in contemporary French writing, 'unlike many contemporary artists, minimalists assume that things *have* a heart, a core, a center'.<sup>3</sup>

Literary Minimalists engage in experiments designed to reveal that heart, core, centre, essence, or necessary condition in the chosen type, genre, form, or aspect of literature by a process of reduction. To reduce means to 'make or become smaller or less in amount, degree, or size'. The Latin original, *reducere*, breaks down into 're', back or again, and 'ducere', to lead or bring.<sup>4</sup> This etymology is relevant to Minimalism because it suggests the way in which Minimalist reduction is often a mission of recovery. Minimalists often believe that the heart, core, or centre has been obscured by conventional literary practice, and they go about trying to remove the excess clutter. Minimalist reduction leads back to the essential.

The practice of literary Minimalism admits a variety of approaches. John Barth's classificatory system is useful in identifying the starting points for many of these approaches. Barth identifies Minimalisms of unit, form, scale, style, and material.<sup>5</sup> Minimalism of unit might be characterised as reducing to a minimum the constituent units of literature or a particular type of literature. For instance, a novel might be thought of as an agglomerate of chapters, so a Minimalist novel could be one in which the chapters are reduced to such a degree as to consist only of what is necessary in order for them to be recognised as chapters. Other units, such as paragraphs, sentences, words, may be similarly reduced. If the essential unit of poetry is conceived as the line, a poem might have only one line. Or the line might be

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<sup>3</sup> Warren Motte, *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, tenth edition.

<sup>5</sup> John Barth, 'A Few Words About Minimalism', *New York Times Book Review*, 28 December 1986, p. 2.

reduced to a single instance of its minimal units, such as the word or the syllable, or even the letter.

Reduction of stories or novels to the minimum definitional characteristics indicated by those terms would be Minimalism of form. For example, Richard Kostelanetz seems to combine Minimalism of unit and form with his single-sentence stories, which are based on the idea that the sentence is the minimal unit of narrative. In other experiments, starting from the idea that narrative development is the formal minimum for the story, Kostelanetz has composed stories entirely of lines that change configuration in a systematic pattern of development.<sup>6</sup> Minimalism of form can also be approached in a very different way, for example by reducing the story so as to emphasise the formal structure consisting of beginning, middle, and end, or of exposition, rising action, climax, and denouement. In formally Minimalist poetry, a regular metre can be established in two short lines, or a formal structure based on rhyme can be accomplished with a mere two words. Robert Lax's poems in which a single word is repeated a number of times are Minimalist in form.

Reduction to the minimum unit or the minimal form reveals what is essential to the structure of the chosen literary type or genre. Minimalism of scale can, but does not necessarily, accompany Minimalism of form, as will be seen in the chapter concerning David Markson. Markson's novel *This Is Not a Novel* is Minimalist in form, but at over 200 pages, it is not Minimalist in scale. By contrast, Kenneth Gangemi's novel *Olt*, at fifty-five pages, and Jean Echenoz's novel *L'Occupation des Sols*, which Motte describes as weighing in at 'only fifteen pages of text', 'just shy of

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<sup>6</sup> Instances of the latter can be found in Kostelanetz, *More Short Fictions* (New York: Assembling Press, 1980) and *Constructs: Stories* (Reno, Nevada: West Coast Poetry Review, 1975). Kostelanetz's *Three-Element Stories* (New York: Archae, 1998) are based on the idea of the sentence as the essential unit of narrative.



two thousand words',<sup>7</sup> are Minimalist in scale. Considering that the perceived norm for short stories is between 2,000 and 12,000 words, or between fifteen and fifty pages long,<sup>8</sup> it is easy to see how reduction in scale can draw attention to questions of form. If *L'Occupation des Sols* is on the same scale as the short story, other factors must contribute to claim for its status as a novel. Poems of a mere line or two are Minimalist in scale as well as in form, and those of a single-word, or like the Saroyan poem above consisting of a single character, are also Minimalist in scale.

Barth defines Minimalism of style as characterised by 'a stripped-down vocabulary, a stripped-down syntax that avoids periodic sentences, serial predications and complex subordinating constructions; a stripped-down rhetoric that may eschew figurative language altogether; a stripped-down, nonemotive tone'.<sup>9</sup> Such stylistic reduction results in the 'flatness' critics so often notice in Minimalist writing. This flatness can amount to a reduction in variety, from a range of tones to a single tone, which itself creates a distinctive tonal effect. The use of ordinary, everyday language, as opposed to the 'heightened' language that some take as the hallmark of the literary, including the figurative language Barth mentions above, is another Minimalist practice. And as Barth has pointed out, reduction of syntax to the simplest forms counts as stylistic Minimalism. 'Refusal of rhetoric' is a frequently remarked Minimalist strategy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Motte, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Holman and Harmon's *Handbook to Literature* says that a 'short-short story' is between 500 and 2,000 words, and a 'long-short story' can be 12,000 to 15,000, so a short story proper is presumably between 2,000 and 12,000. Vince Passaro maintains that the twentieth-century short story 'ought to be something between fifteen and fifty pages long'. C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 'short story'; Vince Passaro, 'Unlikely Stories: The Quiet Renaissance of American Short Fiction', *Harper's Magazine*, August 1999, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Blake Morrison, 'In Defence of Minimalism', *Critical Quarterly* 18:2 (1976), pp. 48-49. In addition to Barth's comment above, see also Warren Motte, p. 4, and Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Edwin Mellen, 1999), p. 15.

Minimalism of material is achieved by reduction of character, setting, action, content, and scope. Some Minimalists write about domestic or quotidian situations or events, or reduce the scope even further to the immediate context of composition. Minimalism of material can also involve reduction that makes the language itself, or even one aspect of it, the subject of the work. The Saroyan poem at the beginning of this introduction is an example. In less extreme cases, reduction of character can mean that no personal history is related, nor even, in many cases, details such as age, appearance, social or economic class, and name. Social, political, and economic contexts tend to be excluded from Minimalist writing, and this too amounts to Minimalism of material. Minimalism of material may also mean that nothing happens in a work.

Because different authors have different ideas about what is essential to literature or to their chosen form or genre, and about what its minimum constituent units are, Minimalist practice varies. The various approaches to and conceptions of Minimalism allow for a rich diversity in Minimalist literature. The authors discussed in this thesis have been chosen to reveal this diversity. However, I wish not merely to provide examples of the possibilities inherent in Minimalism, but also to make a more specific argument regarding the place of Minimalism in twentieth-century American literature. I contend that Minimalism in contemporary American literature has its roots in reductive tendencies in American Modernist literature.

Hugh Kenner has argued that there is a distinctively American quality to the work of certain writers in the earlier part of the twentieth century, and that its influence has been pervasive. '[T]hey do hang together, the American Modernists', writes Kenner.

They shared hidden sources of craftsmanship, hidden incentives to rewrite a page, which we can trace to a doctrine of perception—the

word valued both in itself and in its power to denote—very evident when we watch a second generation of poets (Oppen, Zukofsky) work out themes that seem shared by both Hemingway and Williams. That doctrine of perception, like general semantics, seems peculiarly adapted to the American weather, which fact helps explain why, from Pound's early days until now, modern poetry in whatever country has borne so unmistakably American an impress.<sup>11</sup>

The genealogy that Kenner traces, one that begins with Pound and continues through Hemingway, Williams, Zukofsky and Oppen, is one that I will follow in this thesis, though part of my concern is to map the lines further, through the work of younger writers, some of whom are still at work today. The two aspects of the doctrine of perception Kenner notes, an appreciation of the value of the word as a thing in itself and a commitment to the representational function of language, will be a subject for consideration. But my primary focus is on the Minimalist principles and practices shared by the writers Kenner mentions and those I see as continuing in their tradition. For some of these writers, the values informing Minimalism are peculiarly American and part of the tradition of American literature in which they self-consciously see themselves taking part. Others I will discuss may not follow so directly in the footsteps of pioneers like Williams and Hemingway, but by virtue of their Minimalism they nevertheless participate in and extend the tradition.

In the first chapter I introduce Minimalist tendencies in the work of Hemingway and Williams, and suggest ways in which Pound and Stein had a role in shaping those tendencies. I then discuss some Objectivist poets. I have chosen to place them in this chapter because of the personal associations most of them had with Williams, and because the major features of their work were established in the first half of the century. The poets dealt with in the second chapter, Robert Creeley, Aram Saroyan, and Robert Grenier, were acquainted with one another and fairly self-

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<sup>11</sup> Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), pp. xvii-xviii.

conscious about their participation in the poetic tradition of Williams and the Objectivists. Raymond Carver, whose work I examine in Chapter 3, did look to Hemingway (as well as Williams) as a model, and was often spoken of as the leader of a group of Minimalist writers that included Mary Robison. The personal connections, between the generations of fiction writers and among the later one, were not as strong as those established by the poets but they were in place to some degree.

The writers I consider at greater length in subsequent chapters, Robert Lax, Lydia Davis, and David Markson, each developed his or her distinctive Minimalism independently. They did not, of course, write in a vacuum, and I will indicate the ways in which other writers and artists contributed to the development of their Minimalist aesthetics. Although they are grouped less neatly with the others on the basis of personal connections, their work gives evidence of the variety, vitality, and quality of Minimalist work in poetry, the short story, and the novel. All three have pursued radical and sustained programmes of reduction that serve as indicators of their commitment to Minimalism.

Robert Lax began writing Minimalist poetry in the late 1950s, and continued doing so until his death in 2000. His abstract brand of Minimalism serves as a complement to the materialist or concrete focus of much of the other poetry I will discuss. Lax's poetry was profoundly influenced by the work of the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt, who was also his friend. An exploration of Lax's work thus provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between visual art and Minimalist literature.

Lydia Davis's fiction is primarily in the short story form. Davis subjects the form and elements of the short story to a process of analysis, placing language and narrative under minute scrutiny. Her reductive method exposes the human obsession with using various rule-bound systems such as grammar, logic, and mathematics in

the search for meaning. Davis began writing in a Minimalist mode in the 1970s, and her most recent collection appeared in 2001.

David Markson is a novelist whose oeuvre is in a Modernist vein that is at once experimental and mindful of tradition. In his three most recent books, Markson shears away taken-for-granted features of the novel in order to find something even more basic (and more important) to the genre and perhaps to literature itself. Markson's turn to Minimalism was the choice of a mature writer with more than thirty years experience as a novelist. His latest Minimalist novel, *Vanishing Point*, was published in 2004.

Although I make reference to the visual arts at various points, including to Minimalist visual art, I will not devote substantial time to the subject. Minimalism in visual art has already been well documented.<sup>12</sup> Minimalist art is an American phenomenon that arose in the 1960s. Its main practitioners include Donald Judd, Carl André, and Robert Morris. These artists worked in abstract three-dimensional forms that tended to derive from or stand as a reaction against Abstract Expressionist painting. Histories of Minimalist art tend to focus on the 1960s, but some of the artists associated with Minimalism continued to produce Minimalist work for some time, and the work still evinces interest. To give a couple of examples, Carl André regularly exhibits new Minimalist work in London,<sup>13</sup> and there was a major retrospective of Judd's work at the Tate Modern in 2004. Works of Minimalist visual art serve as analogies for literary works at times in this thesis, and at least one author discussed here, Aram Saroyan, explicitly cites Minimalist art as an influence on his work.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (London: Studio Vista, 1969); Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988); David Batchelor, *Minimalism* (London: Tate Gallery, 1997); Hal Foster, 'The Crux of Minimalism', Chapter 2 of *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (MIT Press, 1999), pp. 35-68; and James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> One such exhibit was 'Words and Small Fields', at Sadie Coles Gallery, 13 December 2000-2 February 2001.

However, my research has convinced me that a proper consideration of the relationship between the two forms would involve looking at literary Minimalism not just in the context of Minimalist art, but in the more general tradition of artistic abstraction.

Minimalism has also been used as a label for one of the three 'main streams of American art music outside of jazz'.<sup>14</sup> Like Minimalist visual art, Minimalist music has been written about at greater length and more systematically than Minimalism in literature. It, too, arose in the 1960s, and its primary composers are LaMonte Young, Terry Reilly, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams. The music does feature repetition and reduction of tone, both of which also occur in literary Minimalism. But there is little suggestion that Minimalist music has been directly influential on Minimalist literature, so I will not undertake to discuss it here.

Minimalism is also a relevant term in architecture and in linguistics, among other fields. But the task of this thesis is not to explore Minimalism in all its forms. Rather, I want to focus on literature, which has been less thoroughly documented than Minimalism in other art forms. In particular, I will attempt to map a history of Minimalism in American poetry and prose, and to consider some of its most distinguished experiments.

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<sup>14</sup> John Warthen Struble, 'Minimalism', in *The History of American Classical Music: McDowell through Minimalism* (London: Robert Hale, 1995), p. 321.

## CHAPTER 1: *Minimalism and Modernism*

The tradition of Minimalism in American literature that I argue developed in the twentieth century has its foundations in the work and ideas of certain Modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Ernest Hemingway.<sup>15</sup> All participated in the establishment of Minimalist tendencies, although each did so in his or her own way and to varying degrees. My purpose here will be to identify reductive tendencies and the values that inform them in the work of these writers. Although I will not give a full account of the work of any authors in this chapter, I will discuss Williams and Hemingway at greater length than Pound and Stein. Both men have been enormously influential in American literature. The Minimalist aspects of Williams and Hemingway are not always those their followers chose to imitate and develop. But as I hope to show in later chapters, other writers do look to Williams and Hemingway as models for their own Minimalist practice. Furthermore, certain writings of Williams and Hemingway serve as significant examples of Minimalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

I will also give a brief account of some writers associated with Objectivist poetry, a 'movement' that began in 1931 and whose importance to contemporary American poetry is still being registered. According to Andrew McAllister, the Objectivists served to 'bridge a gap between the explosive early years of the century, the radicalism of the Armory Show, the extraordinary way-making first generation Modernists, and the post-war period'.<sup>16</sup> Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and Lorine Niedecker shared and developed, again each in his or her own

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<sup>15</sup> It is not my purpose to define Modernism in this thesis; instead, I will use the term for the sake of convenience to refer to writers active during the first decades the twentieth century who sought in one way or another to 'make it new'.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew McAllister, 'Introduction', *The Objectivists* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996), p. 15.

way, the Minimalist tendencies found in the other writers in this chapter. Their writing in this vein also continued well into the century.

I am aware that there are major differences between the authors I will discuss in this, as well as in later chapters. My principal purpose is to identify those aspects of their work that can be considered Minimalist, and in that way I will stress their similarities. But I am also concerned to indicate the variety possible under the Minimalist rubric, and so I will attempt to illustrate different Minimalist practices and principles among them.

A good place to start in tracing the history of Minimalism in twentieth-century American literature is with Imagism. The Imagist manifestos written by Ezra Pound and F. S. Flint attempt to identify the essential in literary expression, advocate formal reduction, and focus on constituent units. Imagism is based on the notion of the presentation of an image as the essential purpose of poetry. Such is the importance of the image according to Ezra Pound's Imagist doctrine that he says 'it is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works'.<sup>17</sup> In his 1915 preface to *Some Imagist Poets* Pound explicitly declared the principles of Imagism to be 'the essentials of all great poetry, indeed of all great literature'.<sup>18</sup> This focus on essentials is Minimalist in spirit, as are the reductive practices advocated by Pound and Flint.

Two of F. S. Flint's three Imagist rules published in his essay 'Imagisme' in *Poetry* in 1913 are concerned with reduction. The insistence on 'Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective'<sup>19</sup> amounts to cutting out whatever gets in

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<sup>17</sup> Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Pound, Preface to *Some Imagist Poets 1915*, *Imagist Poetry*, p. 135.

<sup>19</sup> Flint, 'Imagisme', *Imagist Poetry*, p. 129.



the way of a direct approach, getting rid of excessive verbiage or obfuscating language in favour of that which is essential, the direct presentation of the image. The rule advising writers ‘To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation’<sup>20</sup> is one that advocates limiting poetry to that which is necessary. The third rule, in which writers are told ‘to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome’<sup>21</sup> may not involve the sort of reduction associated with Minimalism, but it exhibits a concern with the essential unit of poetry, here conceived as the musical phrase.

The rhetorical stance suggested by the title of Pound’s ‘A Few Don’ts By An Imagiste’ is one that emphasises reduction by means of avoidance. Although Pound doesn’t manage to structure the entire essay as a list of ‘don’ts’—he admits that he ‘can not put all of them into Mosaic negative’<sup>22</sup>—it is significant that he finds it necessary to warn against certain poetic practices. Dispensing poetic advice in the form of commandments is a rather aggressive way of proceeding. It was, of course, part of the Modernist project to break old habits of composition in order to ‘make it new’, and this was not an easy task. Reduction is a laborious process that requires time and effort. As Pound’s previously quoted preference for a single clear image over voluminous works suggests, a lifetime can be spent on the former as well as on the latter.

Pound described his ‘In a Station of the Metro’ as an exercise in reduction. He said that he first wrote it as ‘a thirty-line poem’ that he then reshaped into two<sup>23</sup>:

The apparition of these faces in a crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts’, p. 130.

<sup>23</sup> Pound, ‘Vorticism’, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1916), p.103.

Hugh Kenner says that Pound devised ‘with mental effort’ a poem that was a ‘reduced, intensified’ version of the vision that inspired it,<sup>25</sup> thus stressing the active nature of poetic reduction. As with any movement, Imagist poetry did not always live up to the standards set by its manifestos. But it was extremely influential: as T. S. Eliot noted, Imagism is often regarded as the starting point for a distinctively modern literature.<sup>26</sup>

Gertrude Stein was a patron of abstract artists in the first decade of the twentieth century, and she was a friend of Matisse and Picasso. Her early literary experiments were attempts to do with language what abstract artists were doing with paint. Cézanne was particularly important to the development of her work.<sup>27</sup> Stein claimed to have composed *Three Lives* (1909) under the inspiration of a Cézanne portrait.<sup>28</sup> She is quoted as saying that ‘Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously’.<sup>29</sup> The method of ‘beginning again and again and again’ is related to this concept. It was one Stein had used in *Three Lives*,<sup>30</sup> and involved treating each sentence as an individual unit. In the following paragraph from ‘Melanctha’, each sentence expresses the main idea in a slightly different way:

Jeff Campbell never could forget the sweetness in Melanctha Herbert, and he was always very friendly to her, but they never any more became close to one another. More and more Jeff Campbell and Melanctha fell away from all knowing of each other, but Jeff never

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<sup>24</sup> I have chosen to reproduce the version published in *Lustra* in 1916. Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1948), p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> Eliot, ‘American Literature and the American Language’ (1953), *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> See Jayne L. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein, from Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

<sup>28</sup> Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in *Stein: Writings 1903-1932* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), p. 690.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Bartlett Haas, ‘A Transatlantic Interview’, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1971), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Stein, ‘Composition as Explanation’, *Writings 1903-1932*, p. 525.

could forget Melanctha. Jeff never could forget the real sweetness she had in her, but Jeff never any more had the sense of a real religion for her. Jeff always had strong in him the meaning of all the new kind of beauty Melanctha Herbert once had shown him, and always more and more it helped him with his working for himself and for all the colored people.<sup>31</sup>

The sentences are not subject to a subordinating arrangement in the paragraph. Instead of using the paragraph as a unit of prose that develops or provides details of or support for the idea expressed in the main sentence, Stein makes each sentence, each of the units, as important as the whole.<sup>32</sup> This intense focus on the individual unit of composition is characteristic of Minimalist writing.

Stein was also important for the way in which she subverted conventions of narrative and syntax, thus raising the profile of the individual word within the sentence, as well as the sentence within the paragraph. In a 1946 interview, she recalled that at one point, 'words began to be for the first time more important than the sentence structure or the paragraphs'. She felt, she said, 'a need of breaking it down and forcing it into little pieces'. This sort of work reached its 'apex' in *Tender Buttons* (1914).<sup>33</sup>

Stein used at least two methods of disrupting grammatical structures in *Tender Buttons*. One of these methods involves constructing sentences with words of the correct grammatical category in the appropriate place, but choosing words whose meaning makes the sentence as a whole nonsensical. Two such sentences in 'Malachite' are: 'The sudden spoon is the same in no size. The sudden spoon is the wound in the decision'.<sup>34</sup> 'Sudden' is not an adjective one would normally apply to the noun 'spoon', but as adjective and noun they do go together to form the noun

<sup>31</sup> Stein, 'Melanctha', *Three Lives* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 146-147.

<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, the final sentence does vary somewhat from the others, with the introduction of Jeff Campbell's work and the omission of the estrangement between him and Melanctha. But this sentence does not govern the paragraph; it stands on the same level as the others.

<sup>33</sup> Haas, 'A Transatlantic Interview', pp. 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> *Writings 1903-1932*, p. 322.

phrase of the sentence. The verb phrases are also grammatical. In the second sentence there is a verb, a subject complement, and a prepositional phrase with a noun in the position of the prepositional complement. The sentence is well structured, but it makes no sense: how can a spoon be a wound, and how can there be a wound in a decision? Stein's nonsensical sentences invite us to consider words not just as something to be subsumed into or looked through for their meaning, but as entities in their own right. The words, the parts, are at least as important as the whole.

Stein also flouted the conventions of grammar by ignoring them, as in 'Cream cut. Any where crumb. Left hop chambers'.<sup>35</sup> Here there is no attempt to approximate correct syntax, but certain indicators of a sentence, such as an initial capital and a full stop at the end, are present. When no logical sense can be made of these sentences, the reader is forced to consider the individual words and relations between them other than grammatical ones, or even alternative grammatical possibilities. 'Cream' may be a noun or an adjective; 'left' could indicate direction or be the past tense of 'to leave'. Stein's radical experiments provided a model for the reconsideration of literary language, and focused attention on the linguistic units of the sentence and the word.

Before going on to talk about the way Minimalist principles such as those in Imagism and the work of Stein were developed by William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and the Objectivists, I will discuss Hemingway as an early and powerfully influential fiction writer who practised literary reduction, and who learned his craft partially from Pound and Stein.

William Bird's Three Mountains Press published Hemingway's *in our time* in Paris in 1924. The book consisted of a series of very brief stories, eleven of the

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<sup>35</sup> 'Cream', *ibid.*, p. 341.

eighteen merely a paragraph long. These vignettes were interspersed with longer stories in the 1925 *In Our Time*. Although the additional stories in the second book are longer than the vignettes, most of them still seem short in comparison with the norm. The *in our time* stories are drastically reduced in scale; they are a great deal shorter than one might ordinarily expect a story to be.<sup>36</sup> Both books are characterised by flatness of tone and use of ordinary rather than literary language. These early books, on which I will focus, exhibit reduction of scale, form, unit, style, and material. Throughout his career, Hemingway professed strategies of omission in writing that, variously employed, contribute to the tendency toward brevity or formal reduction later characteristic of Minimalist fiction. What Hemingway learned from Pound and Stein and from his training as a journalist contributed to the conciseness of his early work.

Hemingway arrived in Paris in 1922 with letters of introduction to Pound and Stein from Sherwood Anderson. Hemingway acknowledged his literary debt to Pound and said that Pound was the man who ‘believed in the *mot juste*—the one and only correct word to use—the man who had taught me to distrust adjectives’.<sup>37</sup>

Hemingway’s 1925 *In Our Time* has been called an Imagist work that has its source in Hemingway’s exposure to Imagism through Pound in Paris in the early 1920s.<sup>38</sup> But Hemingway also took lessons from Gertrude Stein. He first met with Stein in March

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<sup>36</sup> Short stories are sometimes defined according to their length. For example, Holman and Harmon define a short story as ranging in length from 500 words up to 12,000 to 15,000 words (C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, sixth ed. [New York: Macmillan, 1992], p. 443). According to the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, ‘the vast majority of short stories would fall somewhere between’ 1,600 and 20,000 words. (Ed. J. A. Cuddon; revised by C. E. Preston [London: Penguin, 1998], p. 815). Most of the stories in the 1924 *in our time* range from about seventy-five to about 200 words.

<sup>37</sup> Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Arrow Books, 1996), p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Hasbany, ‘The Shock of Vision: An Imagist Reading of *In Our Time*’, in Linda Welshimer Wagner, ed., *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism* (Michigan State University Press, 1974), p. 229.

1922,<sup>39</sup> and soon became her 'pupil'.<sup>40</sup> Many years later he said that he wished 'to thank Gertrude for everything I learned from her about the abstract relationship of words',<sup>41</sup> the sort of relationships suggested in experiments such as those in *Tender Buttons* described above. Hemingway may have learned a great deal from Stein and Pound, as well as others, but as Edmund Wilson remarked, in the 'dry compressed little vignettes' of *in our time* he seemed to have 'almost invented a form of his own'.<sup>42</sup> As Williams put it, 'Hemingway did at first sit at the feet of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. They taught him a lot. And then he went out and capitalized on it'.<sup>43</sup>

Hemingway worked as a journalist for the *Toronto Star* from 1920 to 1924, and some of his early stories are based in his experience as a reporter. 'At least twenty-five *Toronto Star* articles', says Elizabeth Dewberry, 'are directly echoed in *In Our Time*'.<sup>44</sup> Hemingway did not just draw on journalism for material, but also applied principles of good journalistic writing to his fiction. As directed by the *Toronto Star*'s stylesheet he wrote using simple declarative sentences, preferably short ones, avoided adjectives, and did away with unnecessary words.<sup>45</sup>

Some of these principles can be seen in the opening of 'Indian Camp':

At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting.

Nick and his father got in the stern of the boat and the Indians shoved it off and one of them got in to row. Uncle George sat in the stern of the camp rowboat. The young Indian shoved the camp boat off and got in to row Uncle George.

The two boats started off in the dark. Nick heard the oarlocks of the other boat quite a way ahead of them in the mist. The Indians

<sup>39</sup> Michael Reynolds, *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, pp. 872-873.

<sup>41</sup> In George Plimpton, 'An Interview with Ernest Hemingway', in Wagner, ed., *Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism*, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, Review of *Three Stories and Ten Poems* and *in our time* (*Dial* 77, October 1924), in Jeffrey Meyers, ed., *Hemingway: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, 'A Beginning on the Short Story (Notes)', *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 298.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Dewberry, 'Hemingway's Journalism and the Realist Dilemma', *The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

rowed with quick choppy strokes. Nick lay back with his father's arm around him. It was cold on the water. The Indian who was rowing them was working very hard, but the other boat moved further ahead in the mist all the time.<sup>46</sup>

The sentences here are generally simple. There are very few adjectives; the Indian is 'young', and the rowing strokes are 'quick' and 'choppy'. In the latter case, the adjectives draw attention to a certain rhythm, that of the prose as well as the strokes. Hemingway avoids adjectives by finding different ways of expressing things. Mist is present in noun form. Rather than saying that it was a 'misty' early morning, or that the air over the lake is 'misty', the mist becomes a substantive feature present in the scene. A few words are arguably unnecessary, such as the intensifier 'very' (though when the urgency of the journey becomes clear later, the adverb seems justified).

The last words in the passage, 'in the mist all the time', might seem to be redundant, since we have already been told that the other boat was 'ahead of them in the mist'. But it is characteristic of Hemingway to emphasise by means of repetition, a skill he may have learned from Stein.<sup>47</sup> We are not told that there was an atmosphere of mystery on the lake that morning. Nor does Hemingway ever spell out that the boat continually moving farther ahead of Nick in the mist is a symbol for the mysteries of life that continually escape one, even after one has gained in knowledge and experience, as Nick has by the end of the story. Instead, the boat, its movement, and the mist are simply features of the scene, and by the merest gesture, the repetition of a phrase, Hemingway has suggested much more than he actually says.

Imagism was based on the notion of the presentation of the image as essential to poetry. Hemingway famously spoke of beginning the process of composition with

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<sup>46</sup> *In Our Time: Stories by Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons/Macmillan, 1958), p. 15. Subsequent references will appear in the text with the abbreviation *IOT*.

<sup>47</sup> According to Michael Reynolds, 'After reading Stein's *Three Lives*, Hemingway knew he could learn something from Gertrude's continuous present tense and her steady repetition of key phrases that created meanings larger than the words themselves'. *Hemingway: The Paris Years*, p. 37.

'one true sentence', a 'simple declarative sentence' that he 'knew or had seen or had heard someone say'.<sup>48</sup> The 'one true sentence' seems to have represented the kernel of the story for Hemingway, the seed that contained its essence. He found it important to get rid of anything that might obscure that essential sentence. 'If I started to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut that scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence I had written' (*AMF* 12). The 'one true sentence' forms the basis of his aesthetic.

Hemingway's will to reduction was wedded to another impulse: the urge to tell. The two are illustrated by a passage from a letter he wrote in 1933: 'I am trying to make, before I get through, a picture of the whole world—or as much of it as I have seen. Boiling it down always, rather than spreading it out thin'.<sup>49</sup> 'Boiling it down' suggests reducing to essentials, getting rid of what might dilute the import of the sentence (or the picture) and make it 'thin'. Unnecessary words or (merely decorative) adjectives dilute the sentence, making its essence difficult to discern; reduction solidifies it.

The impulse to tell made Hemingway write, and the reductive impulse made him pare down that writing to a bare minimum. The tension between the two is clear in *Death in the Afternoon*, which appeared in 1932. There he expounded his theories of omission, but the final chapter begins with these words: 'If I could have made this enough of a book it would have had everything in it'.<sup>50</sup> He then proceeds to list things he would have included. The theory of elimination had to compete with the urge to tell all. Gradually, Hemingway began to move away from the severe and startling reductiveness of his early style. Although he did not completely abandon practices of

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<sup>48</sup> Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Larry W. Phillips, ed., *Ernest Hemingway on Writing* (New York: Scribner, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (London: Grafton Books, 1977), p. 237.



elimination and omission, in his later work the story that demands to be told in such a way as to contain 'everything' gains dominance over the aesthetic with which he began.

Nevertheless these two aspects remain entwined. For instance, the urge to tell is closely bound up with notions of truth, of the essence that must not be obscured, that lead Hemingway's writing toward Minimalism. These conjoined effects are related to his training as a journalist. In 1922, Hemingway wrote six 'lucid prose poems' in his notebook<sup>51</sup> that may be some of the 'true sentences' he later wrote about in *A Moveable Feast*. Three of them begin with the words 'I have seen' and two with 'I have watched',<sup>52</sup> clearly indicating their basis in visual experience. Hemingway's prose often amounts to an account of the perceptions of the narrator, as Hugh Kenner has noted, in a cinematic technique that shows rather than tells,<sup>53</sup> that presents what is empirically verifiable, 'visible or audible or tangible facts'.<sup>54</sup> Yet, Hemingway had not actually 'seen' or 'watched' all of the things related in the 'true sentences'. According to Michael Reynolds, it would have been impossible for Hemingway to have witnessed the shooting he describes in one of these pieces because he was ill and at home on the day it took place.<sup>55</sup>

Carlos Baker emphasises Hemingway's aesthetic of truth-telling in the strongest possible terms, citing his 'nearly absolute devotion to what is true', and claiming that 'no other writer of our time has so fiercely asserted, so pugnaciously defended, or so consistently exemplified the writer's obligation to speak truly'.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Gerogiannis, 'Introduction', *Ernest Hemingway: Complete Poems*, revised edition, (University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. xxii.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>53</sup> Kenner, *A Homemade World*, pp. 123-129.

<sup>54</sup> Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 52.

<sup>55</sup> Reynolds, pp. 95-96. Reynolds also points out several instances in which Hemingway's journalistic and literary writing was not solidly based on his experience. See, for example, pp. 21, 114-115, 139.

<sup>56</sup> Baker, pp. 64, 48.

Baker does not attempt to deny that Hemingway also invents, but argues that when he does it is a point of honour for him to base invention on what he actually knows, what he has seen and experienced for himself.<sup>57</sup> Others downplay the importance of truth to experience in Hemingway's writing. Reynolds claims that, 'with Hemingway, there is no such thing as non-fiction; there are simply degrees of fiction' and that for Hemingway 'direct experience was not necessarily the most reliable source of information for a writer'.<sup>58</sup> Hemingway insisted on the creative aspect of writing as well as truth-telling, saying that the job of an author is to 'make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive'.<sup>59</sup> Fiction it may be, but its accountability to some standard of 'truth' or to the real world is a feature by virtue of which Hemingway's fiction serves as a paradigm for much contemporary Minimalism.

To train the focus on facts and that which is apprehended by the senses is a proto-Minimalist act of reduction. To present only what the senses can register is a literary strategy of omission. It entails leaving out an account of the emotional states of the characters and any narratorial comment regarding the significance (moral or otherwise) of events. Hemingway tried to create the *effect* of having actually experienced what he describes. His motivation for presenting what are ostensibly empirically verifiable details, as well as for engaging in literary reduction, was largely aesthetic. He wanted to invent something new that had value in itself, 'a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive', something that did not depend on its actual representation of something else for its 'truth value'. His presentation of the 'real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion',<sup>60</sup> was calculated to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>58</sup> Reynolds, p. 61. See also Dewberry, p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> Hemingway, in Plimpton, 'An Interview', p. 38.

<sup>60</sup> *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, p. 29.

provoke that emotion in his audience. That is, the method of leaving out instructions from the narrator about the emotional significance of events was designed to be a more effective means of conveying emotion than explicit narratorial directions. Hemingway's Minimalist method of creating emotional response in the reader was simply that, a better *method* with the same end in view.

Hemingway's characters do sometimes express emotions and desires in dialogue, but he seems to avoid guiding the reader toward any particular emotional response. An example is the following exchange between husband and wife in 'Cat in the Rain':

'And I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes.'

'Oh, shut up and get something to read,' George said. He was reading again.

His wife was looking out of the window. It was quite dark now and still raining in the palm trees.

'Anyway, I want a cat,' she said. 'I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat.'

George was not listening. He was reading his book. His wife looked out of the window where the light had come on in the square. (IOT 94)

The narration here is reduced to simple relation of the facts. Any conclusion the reader comes to must be the product of his or her own judgement, based on the dialogue and the factual narration. The terms in which the dialogue is framed are simple, neutral, devoid of any emotional coloration. How different would the passage sound if, when George tells his wife to 'shut up', he 'snaps' the words, or the wife's reply was presented as 'she whined' rather than 'she said'. There is a refusal to provide guidance regarding how the events of should be perceived. Instead they are merely presented. Even the title of the story deflects attention away from any emotional content or significant conclusion. It is merely descriptive of a single element in the story, the cat the wife sees in the rain.

The emphasis on truth, the urge to show rather than tell, also affect the narrator's language in the story, giving it the flat tone and ordinary quality of Minimalism. Except for the occasional foreign word or phrase, appropriate to the setting of a number of the stories, the vocabulary, like the sentence structure, is simple.

There were only two Americans stopping at the hotel. They did not know any of the people they passed on the stairs on their way to and from their room. Their room was on the second floor facing the sea. It also faced the public garden and the war monument. There were big palms and green benches in the public garden. (*IOT* 91)

Any adjectives are of the simplest sort. The palms are not 'massive' or 'stately' or 'towering' but merely 'big'. The benches are 'green' rather than some more 'colourful' version of that hue. In effect, Hemingway's Minimalism of style is a turn away from conventional notions of what constitutes 'literary' language toward something that more closely resembles ordinary speech.

Such ordinary speech is also present in the dialogue itself. The wife's sentences do not appear to have been subjected to any sort of literary embellishment, which contributes to their seeming 'true to life' or realistic. Hemingway's pure presentation of dialogue, without narratorial comment, is thus one method of creating the effect of truth. He also lets the characters speak for themselves in another way. More than half of the *In Our Time* stories have a first-person narrator who is characterised by a particular manner of speaking. The narrator of one of the vignettes can be identified as British by his use of phrases such as 'It was absolutely topping', and 'We were frightfully put out' (37). A young American tells about his father in 'My Old Man'. His tendency to preface remarks with 'Gee' or 'Well' makes it sound as though he is relating the story orally. Some stories do not have a definite indication of first-person narration such as a pronoun, but still have the quality of speech. One of

the stories from *in our time*, for example, says of an exhausted matador that 'He couldn't hardly lift his arm'.<sup>61</sup>

Wyndham Lewis objected to this levelling out of literary language, particularly in Hemingway's use of first-person narration. He said that it was 'valueless as writing', because it was simply 'lifted out of Nature and [...] tumbled out upon the page: it is the brute material of everyday proletarian speech and feeling'. Lewis's position was based on the belief that there should be a distinction between ordinary and literary language. He characterised Hemingway's first-person narrator as 'a dull-witted, bovine, monosyllabic simpleton' unworthy of literature. But there was also a political dimension to his objection. Lewis took Hemingway's literary levelling to be the result of an unfortunate democratisation or proletarianisation he blamed on the First World War.<sup>62</sup>

Lewis was not entirely wrong in attributing Hemingway's use of ordinary language and factual narration to the effects of the war. Hemingway avoided those words designating abstract concepts that the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederick Henry, finds obscene in favour of facts such as 'the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers'.<sup>63</sup> Words such as 'honour' and 'glory' had, after all, led many a young man to his death in the First World War. Hemingway instead attempted to depict what might be actual events and experiences of soldiers during wartime. The stark realism of his war writings, despite their fictional nature, serves as a powerful argument for the debasing and debilitating effects of war.

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<sup>61</sup> Hemingway, *in our time* (Paris: Three Mountains, 1924), p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Ernest Hemingway: (The "Dumb Ox")', *Men Without Art* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), pp. 35, 29, 22-23.

<sup>63</sup> Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1957), p.162.

War featured prominently in Hemingway's early writings, some of which are set in World War I, and others in the Greek and Turkish war of the early 1920s. Instead of giving sweeping descriptions of war, which would be likely to involve the sort of generalisation and abstraction abhorred by Frederick Henry, Hemingway provides compact stories that stay close to the empirical details. The abstract nature of political theorising makes it out of place in fiction, and as a tonic against it, Hemingway's advice was to read 'War and Peace by Tolstoi and see how you will have to skip the big Political Thought passages'. Because these passages tell rather than show, they do not have the power to last; 'they are no longer either true or important, if they ever were more than topical'.<sup>64</sup> Hemingway's use of 'true' in this context suggests that truth is to be found somewhere other than in theorising; it is located in the facts instead.

Repeated sentence structures result in a flat tone, a levelling out of literary language. Parataxis, more commonly found in speech than writing,<sup>65</sup> gives Hemingway's stories an 'ordinary' feel, and results in a conciseness that is also motivated by reluctance to dictate what should be regarded as important to the reader. The technique is one that Hemingway may have learned from Stein. Compound sentences, liberally sprinkled with 'and', are also prevalent in early Hemingway: 'The crowd came over the barrera and around the torero and two men grabbed him and held him and some one cut off his pigtail and was waving it and a kid grabbed it and ran away with it'.<sup>66</sup> Here, each action occupies the same level of importance in the sentence, in much the same way that Stein said parts were given equal importance in

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<sup>64</sup> *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, p. 111. See also Plimpton, 'Interview', p. 37.

<sup>65</sup> C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, sixth edition (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 'parataxis', p. 343.

<sup>66</sup> *in our time*, p. 23.

Cézanne. Furthermore, the significance of the words are reduced to the same level, with 'and' afforded the same prominence as the words it connects.

Hemingway's preference for parataxis over subordination is related to another technique he may have learned from Stein, that of repetition. In Susan Beegel's words, Hemingway avoided subordination, and chose instead 'a skillfully orchestrated counterpoint of repetitions'.<sup>67</sup> When Krebs, who has returned from the war in 'Soldier's Home', thinks about the girls in his town, the phrases 'he liked' and 'he did not want' predominate, and usually occur at the beginning of a sentence:

He liked to look at them from the front porch as they walked on the other side of the street. He liked the round Dutch collars above their sweaters. He liked their silk stockings and flat shoes. He liked their bobbed hair and the way they walked.

[...] He did not want to get into the intrigue and politics. He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies. It wasn't worth it.

He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live long without consequences. (*IOT* 71)

This passage illustrates Hemingway's use of simple declarative sentences, and the way in which 'lies' and 'consequences' (of war, or perhaps a soldier's lost love or involvement with prostitutes) are placed on the same level as bobbed hair and flat shoes. According to Wyndham Lewis, 'Krebs is a full-blooded example of Hemingway steining away for all he is worth'.<sup>68</sup> But the repetition is not quite as extreme as that in Stein's portrait, 'Picasso':

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, Hemingway must have learned from Stein's repetitive technique.

<sup>67</sup> Susan F. Beegel, 'Ernest Hemingway', *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 102, p. 130.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis, 'The "Dumb Ox"', p. 27. Lewis also taunted Hemingway with the fact that 'his master has been a *mistress!*' (p. 23).

<sup>69</sup> *Stein: Writings 1903-1932*, p. 282.

In the passage from 'Soldier's Home' the repetition is one of sentence structure, but Hemingway also repeats elements in his stories. In the following vignette from *in our time*, at least one of two elements—water, sometimes in the form of rain or mud, and carts—appear in most sentences:

Minarets stuck up in the *rain* out of Adrianople across the *mud* flats. The *carts* were jammed for thirty miles along the Karagatch road. *Water* buffalo and cattle were hauling *carts* through the *mud*. No end and no beginning. Just *carts* loaded with everything they owned. The old men and women, soaked through, walked along keeping the cattle moving. The Maritza was running yellow almost up to the bridge. *Carts* were jammed solid on the bridge with camels bobbing along through them. Greek cavalry herded along the procession. Women and kids were in the *carts* crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles. There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it. It *rained* all through the evacuation.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to those instances I have marked, the old men and women are 'soaked', and the Maritza is clearly a river, so water appears there as well. The result of the repetition of these elements is a sense of the oppression created by the unremitting presence of rain, water, and mud—'no end and no beginning'—and the overwhelmingly long line of carts struggling through the wet. Everything is reduced or levelled to the same condition, that of 'and', or the middle, with 'no end and no beginning'.

In this story, Hemingway has presented the 'sequence of motion and fact' and effectively produced the emotion. As he put it years later in an interview, 'I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become a part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened'.<sup>71</sup> Hemingway's well-known 'iceberg theory' of omission, in which what is known can be eliminated, put underwater, like the seven-

<sup>70</sup> *in our time*, p. 11. Emphasis added.

<sup>71</sup> Plimpton, 'Interview', p. 37.



eighths of the iceberg that doesn't show,<sup>72</sup> depends on shared knowledge or assumptions about what is real. The author can dispense with representing some things precisely because he knows about them and therefore *can* represent them. Hemingway's writing is realistic in that it is set in a recognisable world subject to the laws of cause and effect, and usually in a contemporary setting. The world of his fiction is therefore a familiar one, but it is presented in a reduced manner that allows the reader to engage with it on the basis of his or her own experience. It is not necessary for Hemingway to construct a world; the world is already there, and it is one he shares with his readers. His subjects are things that actually do happen, real events, real emotions, and real people. The 'truth' of the nature of our world is the essence of his fiction. This truth is subject to distortion and is easily obscured, and the only way to write accurately about it is to engage in reduction, to put down only the facts and no more than is necessary.

'A Very Short Story', published first in *in our time* and a year later with minor revisions in *In Our Time*, is Minimalist in scale, form, style, and material, and its Minimalism is put to work in order to achieve a certain effect on the reader. At only seven paragraphs and less than two pages, 'A Very Short Story' is just that; it is reduced in scale relative to the perceived norm for short stories. It is also reduced formally. The story opens abruptly, as if Hemingway had followed the advice he only half-seriously dispensed in 'The Art of the Short Story', that is, to 'amputate' the first 500 words of a story.<sup>73</sup> There is no exposition as such.

Pronouns are used in the first sentence with no previous identification to which they can be tied. Although Hemingway gives a setting right from the start, a

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Hemingway, 'The Art of the Short Story', in Joseph M. Flora *Ernest Hemingway: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p. 132. In his letters, F. Scott Fitzgerald repeatedly urged Hemingway to make cuts in his writing. See Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Fitzgerald and Hemingway: A Dangerous Friendship* (London: André Deutsch, 1995), pp. 53-54, 64-66, 111-115.

'hot evening in Padua', he never directly says that the roof onto which 'they' carried 'him' is that of a hospital. This information is conveyed indirectly and efficiently, as is the fact that the unnamed man is a wounded soldier and Luz, who sits on his bed, is a nurse. Apart from the heat, the location of Padua, and the rooftop setting, the only descriptive details are chimney swifts and searchlights in the sky. The searchlights serve to suggest that it is wartime, and this is confirmed later when he goes 'back to the front'. In a Minimalist reduction of material, the war and any other socio-historical background are eliminated. There is, therefore, no abstract political theorising. The author knows about the war, as do his contemporary readers: this information can safely be omitted.

There are no physical descriptions of Luz and the soldier, except, perhaps, her coolness and freshness in the hot night. We do not know how he was wounded, or where, or when. There is very little in the way of characterisation. There is no dialogue whatsoever, but Luz's voice can be detected from her letter as filtered through the narration. 'A Very Short Story' is also Minimalist in style. The transposition into past tense and third-person narrative has a flattening effect. Had her letters themselves been included, they would have varied the narrative voice, and the overall tone of the story would have been more 'textured'. Her letters would have said, 'I am sorry', 'I love you as always', and 'I believe in you absolutely'. The force is considerably weakened, and the texture flattened, when instead we read: 'She was sorry', 'she loved him as always', 'and believed in him absolutely'.

With the possible exception of the soldier feeling 'sick' about saying good-bye after quarrelling, the words 'absolutely', 'impossible' and 'terrible' are the most intense in the story, and all occur in Luz's letters, as related by the narrator. Being thus 'flattened', they fit in with the overall tone of the story, which is neutral. The

sentences are primarily of the simple declarative variety. The distrust of adjectives Hemingway inherited from Pound is evident, as adjectives are largely omitted. There is the 'silly, talky' time of being nearly anaesthetised, and otherwise hot and dark, cool and fresh, dim and quiet, muddy and rainy, and little else. Not a single colour makes its way into the story. Luz's declarations of love and her claim that it is 'impossible' to get along without him are exposed as meaningless when she declares that 'theirs had been only a boy and girl affair'. Hers is the kind of language that makes adjectives and abstract words untrustworthy.

As is common in Hemingway, place names appear without much, if any, additional description. The names of New York, Milan, Genoa, and Chicago are allowed to stand alone, as if, since they refer to real cities whose characteristics can be determined outside the story, a name is all that is needed. Pordenone is sketched more fully than any of the others: it is a 'muddy, rainy town in the winter', where a battalion of *arditi* is quartered and a hospital is to open. It can be hot in Padua at night, we learn, and the Duomo is 'dim and quiet', and people go there to pray.

Instead of developing his characters and describing the place and setting in detail, Hemingway lets the events carry the story. If a story is conceived as a sequential narration of events, then 'A Very Short Story' fulfils the minimal requirements for a story, with very little added, and so is Minimalist in form. The first paragraph places Luz and the soldier alone on a hot night, her coolness and freshness no doubt attracting him. By the second, they have become lovers, and in the third they want to marry but do not. In the fourth he receives her love letters after being at the front, and in the fifth they quarrel before he returns to the States. Luz finds another lover and writes to tell him so in the penultimate paragraph, and in the last the soldier contracts gonorrhea in a taxi cab. The wish to marry is connected with a church and

with prayer, and contrasts starkly with the sordid encounter in a hired car that results in his illness. In this contrast lies the emotional impact of the story. Or perhaps the affair in Chicago is meant, once Luz's promises have been exposed as frauds, to suggest the true nature of the 'love' she shared with the soldier.

A great deal is left out: descriptions of people and places, backgrounds of the main characters and an explanation of their circumstances at the time of the action, particularly information about the war, 'love scenes', lovers' talk, and analysis of the entire situation. Had he included all of these, Hemingway could have expanded the story to novel size. But the point seems to be that the feeling of deflation, of moving from hope and the holiness of matrimonial union to casual, opportunistic sex and disease, is achieved by reductive methods. Hemingway makes the emotion real by recounting just the events and with only the barest possible hints of all those elements that would be brought into play when telling such a story at novel length. In fact, the flat tone of the story comes across as cynical. The method of its telling contributes to the final impact of the story. The deflation at the end is present all along, it seems. Hemingway's means serve his end; the Minimalism of the story is itself a comment on the events. The urge to tell the tale does not dominate here. Instead, the tale is made to submit to what one might term a Minimalist treatment.

Hemingway's method of leaving things out, his reliance on the 'sequence of motion and fact' and the presentation of that which can be observed rather than explicit information about moods, emotions, and states of mind, his use of first-person narration as a limiting device, and his reductions in scale were all methods adopted by later writers of Minimalist fiction such as Raymond Carver and Mary Robison, who will appear in a later chapter.

In his *Autobiography*, William Carlos Williams related a story about Hemingway that he heard from Robert McAlmon after he and McAlmon had met Hemingway on the streets of Paris.

Bob told me of an incident which happened during a train ride he had had with Hem on his way back from Spain a year before. They had stopped and the passengers had alighted for a breath of fresh air. Beside the track was a dead dog, his belly swollen, the skin of it iridescent with decay. Bob had wanted to get away from the stink as fast as he could, but Hem would not. On the contrary, he got out his notebook and began, to Bob's disgust, to take minute notes describing the carcass in all its beauty.

'I thoroughly approve,' I said.<sup>74</sup>

In their writing, Williams and Hemingway shared an interest in details that appealed to the senses, as well as certain Minimalist principles and personal acquaintance with Pound and Stein.

Williams met Ezra Pound while studying at the University of Pennsylvania in 1902. Pound published Williams in the 1914 *Des Imagistes* anthology, and Williams acknowledged Pound's early influence on him as poet.<sup>75</sup> But within a few years Williams had begun to develop his own style. According to Marjorie Perloff, 'by 1917 when *Al Que Quiere!* was published, Pound's imprint was no longer decisive'.<sup>76</sup> Williams's growing concern with 'the local' can be glimpsed in the numerous addresses to 'my townspeople' in *Al Que Quiere!*, and his commitment to ordinary language in the desire to write a poem that a simple old woman could understand.<sup>77</sup> In addition, as is well known, developments in the visual arts had begun to have a profound effect on Williams's poetry.

<sup>74</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 212. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Williams's *Autobiography* and his essay 'A1 Pound Stein', *Selected Essays*, pp. 162-166.

<sup>76</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 100.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, From 'January Morning', *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909-1939* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), p. 103. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text with the abbreviation *CP 1*.

Bram Dijkstra argues that 'the intensity of avant garde activity and theorizing in New York beginning with the Armory Show [of 1913] left Imagism a rather unexciting and even redundant bone to chew on for poets like Williams'.<sup>78</sup> Williams himself, in speaking of these years, said that he and like-minded poets were 'closely allied with the painters' (*Autobiography* 148). It is important that as he was establishing his independence from Pound Williams transposed the lessons of the avant-garde visual artists to poetry. His remarks on Gertrude Stein's influence on his work and the founding of Objectivism suggest that her ideas about the relation of Cézanne to writing were important in this regard. He valued the example of Stein's 'formal insistence on words in their literal, structural quality of being words'. This insistence was related to 'the matter of paint on canvas as being of more importance than the literal appearance of the image depicted' (*Autobiography* 265), in the way that Stein at times made words more important than the meaning of the sentence in which they appeared.

Other reductions in Williams's work were also associated with experiments in painting. In remarks on *Al Que Quiere* made in 1919, Conrad Aiken noted that Williams 'restricts his observations almost entirely to the sensory plane. His moods, so to speak, are nearly always the moods of the eye, the ear, and the nostril. We get the impression from his poems that his world is a world of plane surfaces'.<sup>79</sup> Such reduction of the poetic ego in favour of the evidence of the senses is a common feature of Minimalist writing.

Williams also experimented with the constituent units of poetry in his efforts to translate ideas about painting to literature. 'To my mind the thing that gave us most

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<sup>78</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> Aiken, 'Mr. Williams and his Caviar of Excessive Individualism, from "Scepticisms: Notes on Contemporary Poetry"', *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 57.

a semblance of a cause was not imagism, as some thought', he wrote in his *Autobiography*, 'but the line' (148). Williams repeatedly expressed his interest in the line, and his remarks on it, as well as his experiments with it, are significant. Line breaks that are characteristic of Williams's poetry began to appear in his work in *Al Que Quiere!*,<sup>80</sup> in poems such as 'Summer Song', which begins

Wanderer moon  
smiling a  
faintly ironical smile  
at this  
brilliant, dew-moistened  
summer morning,-- (CP I 78-79)

Williams sought 'an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from "reality"' (CP I 189). The traditional metrical line was one of those 'complicated ritualistic forms' he abhorred, and his nonmetrical verse was designed to avoid it. Certainly there is little room for metrical pattern to be established in a line as brief as 'at this', and the lines do not follow a regular rhythmic pattern. But Williams does not just break up the metrical unit of the line, he also breaks the syntax. In the lines quoted above, the position of the breaks after the indefinite article 'a' in line two, the demonstrative pronoun 'this' in line four, and the adjective 'dew-moistened' in line five exemplify the enjambment that Stephen Cushman argues is the most common 'technical gesture' of Williams's poetry.<sup>81</sup>

Williams's use of enjambment, his breaking of the line and the grammatical unit of the phrase, is part of his campaign for 'a fundamental regeneration of thought in our language'.<sup>82</sup> He saw Pound and Stein at the vanguard of this movement. For

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<sup>80</sup> Perloff notes that by 1916 Williams had mastered the art of breaking up syntactical units with the line. *Dance of the Intellect*, p. 95.

<sup>81</sup> Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, 'A Pound Stein', p. 162.

Williams, Stein's work was remarkable in that it refocused attention on the elements of language, the words, rather than allowing the domination of habitual structures 'in our thoughtless phrases, in our calcified grammatical constructions and in the subtle brainlessness of our meter and favorite prose rhythms which compel words to follow certain others without precision of thought'.<sup>83</sup> The way to effect the necessary regeneration was a process of cleansing, getting rid of the accumulated burden of the past that weighed language down so that the essential elements could be seen clearly.

For everything we know and do is tied up with words, with the phrases words make, with the grammar which stultifies, the prose or poetical rhythms which bind us to our pet indolences and medievalisms. ... It's the words, the words we need to get back to, words washed clean. Until we get the power of thought back through a new minting of the words we are actually sunk. This is a moral question at base, surely but a technical one also and first.<sup>84</sup>

Despite Williams's repeated assertions about the line as the unit of poetry with which he is most concerned,<sup>85</sup> these remarks suggest that he also placed a great deal of emphasis on the poetic unit of the word.

The technique of enjambment that recurs so frequently in Williams serves to emphasise the word as unit. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, 'A pregnant tension is given to words and the spaces around them by ending a line in the middle of a phrase. Partly this is done to affirm that the sound and weight of a word, in its relation to those around it, is more important than its grammatical connections'.<sup>86</sup> Yet Williams (and Miller) cannot have it both ways, for the effect of enjambment depends (as does so much) upon the grammatical function of the words. Miller claims that 'conjunctions,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>85</sup> For example see the *Autobiography*, p. 61 ('It was the "line" that was the key—a study in the line itself, which challenged me!') and p. 138 ('the poetic line, the way the image was to lie on the page was our immediate concern'). Stephen Cushman also sees the line as the critical unit in Williams. He says that the poet's use of enjambment 'characterizes a prosody based not on time, accents, sounds, or recurrent phrases, but on lineation' (42).

<sup>86</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 299.



prepositions, adjectives, when they come at the end of a line, assume an expressive energy as arrows of force reaching toward the other words'.<sup>87</sup> This force applies only when the words are seen *as* conjunctions, prepositions, adjectives, or articles; they are words that serve to make connections with or modify other words, and have no significance on their own. When we see such words we look automatically for those following that will complete them, so the blank space that comes instead when they are placed at the end of the line is a surprise.

Nevertheless, such placement does startle us into consideration of the word as performing a particular grammatical function. Reading habits in which we look immediately for the noun following the article lead us to read over the article too quickly to actually consider it. Words that serve connecting functions are important, especially when one conceives of the poem as 'a small (or large) machine made of words'.<sup>88</sup> Considering poems as machines made of words involves conceiving of them as objects, as part of reality, a topic to which I will return. But the practice of breaking the line to bring attention to ordinary, workmanlike words such as 'a' and 'this' is also part of Williams's commitment to ordinary language, just as the little word 'and' was important to Hemingway's aesthetic.

Critics often mention Williams's use of everyday language, his stylistic minimalism. John Lowney says that 'the most frequent tributes to Williams's liberating effects on younger writers explain how his use of everyday spoken language fosters formal experimentation'.<sup>89</sup> According to Miller, most of Williams's vocabulary can be found in any pocket dictionary.<sup>90</sup> Charles Bernstein calls Williams

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>88</sup> Williams, 'Author's Introduction', *The Wedge* (Cummington Press, 1944), p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> John Lowney, *The American Avant-Garde Tradition: William Carlos Williams, Postmodern Poetry, and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), p. 20.

<sup>90</sup> Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 292.

and Stein ‘the paradigmatic modernist poets of the ordinary’.<sup>91</sup> Williams’s famous poem ‘This Is Just to Say’ (1934) is indistinguishable from a note left on a kitchen table when deprived of line breaks and with the addition of a few punctuation marks: ‘I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me—they were delicious, so sweet and so cold’ (*CP* 1 372).<sup>92</sup> This use of everyday language goes hand in hand with mundane poetic subject matter, and with Williams’s insistence on ‘local conditions’ as the site for the ‘rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art’ (*Autobiography* 146).

A number of Williams’s poems take the form of ‘snapshots’ of people or animals or things. The term ‘snapshot’ seems more appropriate than ‘portrait’ because Williams catches his subjects unawares. They may be performing some sort of action, which implies observation over a period of time longer than the instant it takes to snap a photograph, but by capturing an action in progress, the snapshot can imply more than the instant depicted. Nevertheless these poems have a narrow focus, on something glimpsed briefly, and they are not placed in a larger context that would provide more momentous significance. Examples include ‘To a Poor Old Woman’ (1935; *CP* 1 383), who is depicted

munching a plum on  
the street a paper bag  
of them in her hand

and ‘His Daughter’ (1948; *CP* 2 140),

Her jaw wagging  
her left hand pointing  
stiff armed  
behind her, I noticed:

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<sup>91</sup> Charles Bernstein, ‘Reznikoff’s Nearness’, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, editors, *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (University of Alabama Press, 1999), p. 231.

<sup>92</sup> Hugh Kenner’s reading of ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ emphasises the way in which the poem, when put into prose, does *not* resemble something one might say. Yet Kenner acknowledges the ordinariness of the language by saying that ‘a farmer would know every one of the words in this little poem’. *A Homemade World*, pp. 59-60.

These poems are the products of observations made, as in 'Pastoral' (1917; *CP* I 64-65), while strolling 'back streets / admiring the houses / of the very poor', and as with what the poet sees there,

No one  
will believe this  
of vast import to the nation.

Each of these recorded images is small in itself, but takes its part in the 'mosaic of facts, American facts'<sup>93</sup> that, as Whitman knew, made up the whole.

Williams does go some way in such poems toward effacing the poetic ego in recording what is seen, but he is not entirely absent. The poet is sometimes present explicitly as in the phrase 'I noticed' in 'His Daughter'. Often, however, the poet-observer is more difficult to discern. Yet the point is that the things observed are important in themselves and Williams is careful not to overburden or obscure them with information about the poet's state of mind.<sup>94</sup> These facts of mundane existence, these common lives, are enough; they are the stuff of which he believes poetry can and should be made. This is, in part, what he means when he insists 'No ideas but in things'. Williams wrote in the Prologue to *Kora in Hell* that

The thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose. It is this difficulty that sets a value upon all works of art and makes them a necessity.<sup>95</sup>

Williams often composed poems on the basis of ordinary occasions, such as the eating of some plums being saved for breakfast, or the stepping about of a cat:

As the cat  
climbed over  
the top of

<sup>93</sup> Basil Bunting, 'Carlos Williams's Recent Poetry' (1934), *Williams: The Critical Heritage*, p. 136.

<sup>94</sup> Conrad Aiken complained about this sort of lack of 'emotional reactions'. See 'Mr. Williams', p. 58.

<sup>95</sup> Williams, 'Prologue: The Return of the Sun', *Kora in Hell*, in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 14.

the jamcloset  
 first the right  
 forefoot

carefully  
 then the hind  
 stepped down

into the pit of  
 the empty  
 flowerpot. (*CP* 1 352)

Such minute, common, everyday events are not Williams's only subjects: he did write poems of a political nature, such as the angry 'Impromptu: The Suckers' (1927; *CP* 1 270-272), and certainly *Paterson* is large in scope as well as scale. But Williams's reduction of style—his use of ordinary language, with little or no poetic embellishment—and his reduction of material—his narrow focus and mundane subjects—are two of the most influential aspects of his poetry.

Williams's reduction of style and content is sometimes matched by extreme formal reduction, and this practice is related to his concept of the poem as object. Although Williams's famous formulation 'a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words' dates from the publication of *The Wedge* in 1944, he had long been promoting the idea of the poem as object. His ideas about the work of art as something that takes its own part in reality rather than being an imitation of nature appeared in *Spring and All* in 1923.<sup>96</sup> Eliminating the redundancies of ritualistic forms is one way to increase the efficiency of a machine made of words. Citing manuscript evidence, Neil Baldwin says that Williams's working method was to write a great deal in the initial stages of composition, to include as much as possible, and then to make

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<sup>96</sup> See also Williams's *Autobiography*, pp. 240-241.

cuts. 'For the true artifice to occur, *reduction* was just as essential'.<sup>97</sup> Formal reduction was an active process for Williams, and he can be seen engaging in it when we compare the second version of 'The Locust Tree in Flower' (1935; *CP* 1 379) with the first. From an already sparse thirty-three words and twenty-four lines, the poem is reduced to a mere thirteen words in as many lines:

Among  
of  
green

stiff  
old  
bright

broken  
branch  
come

white  
sweet  
May

again<sup>98</sup>

This poem makes reference to something outside itself, a flowering tree, so the title tells us. But it is, as Williams said art should be, 'not at all a copy of nature, but something quite different, a new thing, unlike anything else in nature, a thing advanced and apart from it' (*Autobiography* 241). Only two nouns appear in the poem—'branch' and 'May'. It is a linguistic construction built with minimal referential material. The poem is an object with its own right to take its place next to other objects in reality. This applies even if the poem also presents an image of something.

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<sup>97</sup> Neil Baldwin, 'Varieties of Influence: The Literary Relationship of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky', *Credences: A Journal of Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*, n.s. 2:1 (Summer 1982), p. 99.

<sup>98</sup> The earlier poem appears on page 366 of the *Collected Poems*, volume 1.

The reduction in the second version of 'The Locust Tree in Flower' is so extreme that there is barely a hint of grammatical form. It is an object constructed according to some logic other than that of syntax or traditional poetic form, a machine made of words 'pruned to a perfect economy'.<sup>99</sup> The words in it are highlighted as individual things by isolating each one on a line of its own. Here the grammatical function of words such as 'among' and 'of' is both undercut and highlighted: because they are not allowed to perform that function, we are all the more aware of it.

An earlier example of Williams's doctrine of written words as objects is found in *Spring and All*. At the end of one passage he states that the imagination's 'unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence' (*CP* 1 207). The remark is followed by two words, set apart by blank lines before and after them:

This separates

The words perform the function they state; they are objects separating one passage from the next.

Williams shared his belief in the poem as object and his commitment to formal reduction with Louis Zukofsky. Williams and Zukofsky began exchanging work shortly after being introduced by Ezra Pound in 1928,<sup>100</sup> thus beginning what Peter Quartermain has said 'must rank among the most fruitful of literary relationships in this century'.<sup>101</sup> The young Zukofsky had been so impressed by *Spring and All*, a book Williams thought no one had read, that he carried it around with him in his

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<sup>99</sup> Williams, 'Author's Introduction', *The Wedge*, p. 8.

<sup>100</sup> Neil Baldwin, 'Zukofsky, Williams, and *The Wedge*: Toward a Dynamic Convergence', in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, edited by Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1979), p. 130.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Quartermain, '"Actual Word Stuff, Not Thoughts for Thoughts: Louis Zukofsky and William Carlos Williams', *Credences: A Journal of Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*, n.s. 2:1 (Summer 1982), p. 104.

pocket.<sup>102</sup> The direction of influence was not just from the older poet to the younger, however. Zukofsky's fondness for wielding his editorial razor had a significant impact on the writing of Williams. Zukofsky encouraged Williams even further toward the stylistic economy he had admired in *Spring and All*, repeatedly suggesting cuts to the work in question, so the sort of reduction we saw at work in 'The Locust Tree in Flower' often involved Zukofsky's cutting.<sup>103</sup> Williams dedicated his 1944 book *The Wedge* to Zukofsky, and the degree to which the two men shared literary values and an indication of Williams's trust of Zukofsky is that he named Zukofsky his literary executor.<sup>104</sup>

Zukofsky's importance in twentieth-century American poetry is becoming increasingly obvious. He had first-hand acquaintance and literary exchanges with artists such as Pound and Williams who were active in re-shaping poetry in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and he is regarded as an important predecessor for the Language Poets, who remain a powerful poetic force in the twenty-first.<sup>105</sup> Sandra Kumamoto Stanley has argued that 'Zukofsky self-consciously saw himself as a participant in the making of a modern American poetics'.<sup>106</sup> Libbie Rifkin claims that such self-consciousness about his role and position in the history of American poetry may be partly the result of a 'sense of belatedness' among those poets who, like Zukofsky, were of a younger generation than Pound and Williams.<sup>107</sup> According to Rifkin, 'these poets had to "make it new" *after* the generation that had challenged

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 107. See also 'William Carlos Williams', in Zukofsky, *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays* (Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 47.

<sup>103</sup> Baldwin, 'Varieties of Influence', pp. 98-99.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>105</sup> Marjorie Perloff says that Zukofsky is a 'central link' between first and 'second-wave modernism', which includes Language poets. *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (University of California Press, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 9.

lineage with collage and literariness with “direct treatment of the thing.””<sup>108</sup> The ‘intentional production of literary communities’ Rifkin documents was a strategy for these younger poets, a way to counteract their feeling of having been born too late for the revolution.<sup>109</sup> Stanley says that ‘in his critical writings of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Zukofsky was helping to place revolutionary Modernist theories in the public domain, extending the Modernists’ “patent rights” to himself as well as other poets’.<sup>110</sup>

Zukofsky’s creation of the Objectivist group may be seen as a tactic for inclusion among the Modernist revolutionaries. This is despite the fact that his first response to Harriet Monroe’s demand that the writers he chose for the special issue of *Poetry* he edited in 1931 be unified into a movement was to resist. He eventually gave in, and called the poets ‘Objectivists’, although he said that there was no movement: ‘No, some of us are writing to say things simply so that they will affect us as new again’.<sup>111</sup> The name ‘Objectivist’ stuck, and though the poets associated with the term varied in their poetic principles and desire to be associated with the label and each other, it is still considered useful as a way of describing a certain ‘nexus’ of writers.<sup>112</sup> Williams knew members of the group, was published along with them, and shared poetic principles with them. Foremost among these principles is the will to reduction. The impulse to reduce is not apparent in every single piece of Objectivist poetry, but its presence in much of it is more than sufficient for my purposes: to identify features of Objectivist poetry and poetics that may also be called Minimalist and to explore some of the motivations behind them.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Stanley, p. 129.

<sup>111</sup> L. S. Dembo, Interview with Louis Zukofsky, *Contemporary Literature* 10:2 (Spring 1969), p. 203.

<sup>112</sup> See DuPlessis and Quartermain, eds., *The Objectivist Nexus*. DuPlessis and Quartermain include Basil Bunting in their nexus, but I have excluded him because my focus is on American literature. I will also not discuss Carl Rakosi, who is usually counted among the Objectivists.



The roots of Objectivist poetry extend beyond the creation of the term, and Ezra Pound provided crucial impetus for the ideas that would bring the Objectivists together. Pound's principles, such as the exhortation to 'make it new' and the call for direct treatment of the thing, serve as a place from which to begin to formulate the principles shared by the Williams and the Objectivists. But Pound's role in the history of the Objectivists was also a more personal one, and the personal relationships among the poets seem to have fostered their development as individual artists as well as the shared aspects of their poetry and poetics.

By 1928 Zukofsky had met Charles Reznikoff and George Oppen as well as Williams.<sup>113</sup> Reznikoff, born in 1894, and thus in the generation between Williams and Zukofsky, had published his first book in 1918 and had been reading *Poetry* in the 1910s, when Zukofsky (born 1904) and the younger Objectivists were still children. In *Poetry* he took note of Pound's work and critical pronouncements. Zukofsky admired Reznikoff's work for demonstrating 'the process of active literary omission'.<sup>114</sup> Zukofsky's appreciation of Reznikoff's work, and his belief that it exemplified good poetic practice, is indicated in the introduction to the 1931 Objectivists issue of *Poetry*, most of which consisted of a section called 'Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff'.

George Oppen relates how, when he was nineteen years old, he met Zukofsky after happening across the latter's 'Poem Beginning "The"' in Pound's *Exile* 3.<sup>115</sup> By the time he was twenty-one, Oppen and his wife had set up To Publishers,<sup>116</sup> which

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<sup>113</sup> Milton Hindus, 'Introduction' to *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1984), p. 28.

<sup>114</sup> Louis Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff', *Prepositions* +, p. 194.

<sup>115</sup> L. S. Dembo, Interview with George Oppen, *Contemporary Literature* 10:2 (Spring 1969), p. 159.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 160. Zukofsky said that the idea for the name of the press was his: 'To—as we might say, a health to—To' ('William Carlos Williams', *Prepositions* +, p. 47). The name is yet another testament to Zukofsky's interest in 'the little words', and in prepositions themselves.

printed Williams's *A Novelette and Other Prose*, a book by Pound, and the Zukofsky-edited "*Objectivists*" *Anthology* before folding.<sup>117</sup> In 1933, Zukofsky, Williams, Reznikoff, and Oppen set up the Objectivist Press, which, in Reznikoff's words, was 'an organization of writers who are publishing their own work and that of other writers whose work they think ought to be read'. Over the course of about a year the Press produced work by Williams, Oppen, and Reznikoff.<sup>118</sup>

The value of reduction in the process of composition is a Minimalist one that the Objectivists shared. Zukofsky led the group in his formulation of the principles they held in common. Michael Heller has suggested that 'Zukofsky's poetics are to the poetry of our time as Ockham's razor was to the sciences'.<sup>119</sup> Williams noted in Zukofsky's writing the quality of 'speech pared to its essentials, to the salient pertinencies of speech'.<sup>120</sup> In L. S. Dembo's 1968 interview with Zukofsky, the poet expressed his belief in poetic reduction in a variety of ways. In an analogy with mathematics, he suggested that the 'finer' poet has a greater appreciation for and understanding of the condensed 'equation'. He avoided the 'clutter' of 'extra adjectives, extra adverbs', and preferred concision to long-windedness.<sup>121</sup> Instead, he argued that 'a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*'.<sup>122</sup> Zukofsky proclaimed in *A Test of Poetry* that 'condensation is more than half of composition',<sup>123</sup> and he equated excellence in poetry with Minimalist principles: 'Good poetry is the barest—most essentially complete—form

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<sup>117</sup> Tom Sharp, 'The "Objectivists" Publications', *Sagetrieb* 3:3 (Winter 1986), p. 45.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>119</sup> Michael Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches: Essays on the Objectivist Poets and Poetry* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 20.

<sup>120</sup> Williams, 'A New Line is a New Measure: Louis Zukofsky's *Anew*', *Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 166.

<sup>121</sup> Dembo, Interview with Zukofsky, pp. 210, 214, and 212.

<sup>122</sup> Zukofsky, 'Poetry', *Prepositions* +, p. 10.

<sup>123</sup> Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry* (Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 81.

of presenting a subject; good poetry does not linger to embroider words around a subject'.<sup>124</sup>

In his introduction to the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* in 1931, Zukofsky emphasised, with special reference to the work of Reznikoff, 'sincerity and objectification'. Sincerity concerns, at least in part, 'the detail, not the mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist'.<sup>125</sup> Zukofsky here was advocating the sort of foundation in empirical experience that was so important to Williams. There is also the suggestion that preconceived notions are to be avoided, that 'the things' are to be approached without prejudice, 'as they exist' and not prematurely conceptualised. Zukofsky also linked the musical aspect of the poem to the concept of sincerity. Poems exhibiting sincerity have at least a hint of 'completed sound or structure, melody or form', and 'the things as they exist' are shaped and directed 'along a line of melody'.<sup>126</sup>

'Objectification' refers to the treatment of the poem as object, and suggests the value of craftsmanlike attention to its construction. Such careful construction might bring to mind Williams's 'machine made of words' in which 'there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant'.<sup>127</sup> For Zukofsky, words were not the sole components in the poem as object. 'Ideation' was also involved in the structure itself, and objectification was bound up with an 'apprehension' of the poem in a 'rested totality'.<sup>128</sup> The poem of 'objectification' may be extremely brief, 'may exist in a very few lines', as Zukofsky maintained it does in examples from Reznikoff. But to achieve 'rested totality', it must be complete in itself, a poem 'to which the mind does

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>125</sup> Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification', p. 194.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Williams, 'Author's Introduction', *The Wedge*, p. 8.

<sup>128</sup> Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification', p. 194.

not wish to add'.<sup>129</sup> Like a machine, it must have all the necessary parts, and only the necessary parts; it must be Minimalist.

As far as sincerity is concerned, Zukofsky appears to emphasise 'thinking' in the phrase 'thinking with the things as they exist' rather than the presentation of sensory data. The tension between what the senses perceive and how the mind conceives it is obvious in poem 21 from *Anew*:

Can a mote of sunlight defeat its purpose  
When thought shows it to be deep or dark?

See sun, and think shadow.<sup>130</sup>

Instead of recording what confronts the senses, the poems themselves tend to provide a sensory experience, in particular an aural one. Zukofsky's extreme emphasis on the musical quality of the poetry means that the sonic aspect often takes precedence over any representational function, whereas Williams sought to construct real objects, machine-poems, that depicted something in the world as well as taking their place in it.

Yet it would be a mistake to say that Zukofsky was not interested in the representational aspect of poetry. In fact, he remarked that 'Good verse is determined by the "core of the matter"', which consists of 'certain lasting emotions' that can be translated across eras and languages. 'Ferry' (*CSP* 24) manages to exemplify Zukofsky's concept of sincerity and to serve a representational function:

Gleams, a green lamp  
In the fog:  
Murmur, in almost  
A dialogue

Siren and signal  
Siren to signal.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., pp. 195-196.

<sup>130</sup> Zukofsky, *Complete Short Poetry* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 88. Subsequent references will appear in the text with the abbreviation '*CSP*'.

Parts the shore from the fog,  
 Rise there, tower on tower,  
 Signs of stray light  
 And of power.

Siren to signal  
 Siren to signal.

Hour-gongs and the green  
 Of the lamp.

Plash. Night. Plash. Sky.

There is little here but the recording of visual and auditory experience, but the details are presented and arranged in a musical fashion. There is assonance and alliteration from the first line. Rhyme in lines two and four and eight and ten adds to both the sonic character of the poem and to the sense of its structure. Two repetitions of the phrase 'siren to signal' (with one slight variation) serve as a refrain that follows each four-line verse in which the second and fourth lines rhyme.<sup>131</sup> The repetition of the onomatopoeic 'plash' between words evocative of the setting in the last two lines enhances the sense of 'dialogue'.

'Ferry' appears to satisfy both requirements for sincerity: 'thinking with the things as they exist' and directing them 'along a line of melody'. The poem is also a good candidate for objectification. The pattern is established efficiently, with only two instances of the verse and its refrain, thus there is no more than is needed for the melodic effect. The musical structure itself may serve as an example of ideation, both in its role in the composition of the poem, the way in which the poet has conceptualised it, and in how the reader conceives of it. The variation from the established pattern at the end contributes to the sense of 'rested totality', to the feeling that the poem has reached a conclusion and need continue no further.

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<sup>131</sup> Lines four and seven also rhyme, which pulls the poem together even tighter, but this rhyme does not fit into the structural scheme in a regular way.

Zukofsky's tendency to play with the construction of a poem also exemplifies 'objectification' in the sense of treating the poem as an object. Two poems from *Songs of Degrees*, '1: With a Valentine (the 12 February)' and '2: With a Valentine (the 14 February)', play on the variations in sense and rhythm possible among a group of words merely by changing the punctuation and lineation. The order of the twelve words remains the same. In '1' (CSP 145) they are presented only once:

Hear, her  
Clear  
Mirror,  
Care  
His error.  
In her  
Care  
Is clear.

Although the poems may refer to or have been inspired by some external incident or situation, the real subject of the poems is the language itself. The changes in meaning produced by the variations in punctuation result in instability in referential sense. For example, in '2' (CSP 146) the last five lines of '1' are transformed to

Care  
His  
Error in  
Her—  
Care  
Is  
Clear.

Removing the full stop between 'Error' and 'In' completely changes the way in which it can be interpreted.

The isolation of words on the lines adds to the effect of a minute focus on the particulars of language. The poem is tightly structured around a few sounds. An 'r' sound is present in nine of the twelve words. There are five different vowel sounds. The short 'i' of 'His', 'In', 'Is', and the first syllable of 'Mirror', and the short 'o' in 'Mirror' and 'Error' are two of them. 'Hear' and 'Clear', of course, rhyme, as do

‘Care’ and the first syllable of ‘Error’. The only word that does not fit precisely with the others is ‘Her’, but the vowel difference between it and several of the others is slight, and seems even more so because the word ends with the ubiquitous ‘r’. There are no inefficiencies in this ‘machine made of words’.

Zukofsky’s poems vary in length, but some, such as the four-word ‘The’ (‘The / desire / of / towing’, *CSP* 232) are Minimalist in scale and form. Four words also make up the entire sixteenth movement of “A”. Those words, ‘An’, ‘inequality’, ‘wind’, and ‘flower’<sup>132</sup> are arranged across the page in a manner untypical of Zukofsky. It is perhaps significant that this movement immediately precedes one devoted to Williams, who did experiment with typographic layout.

“A”-17 is dedicated to Williams’s widow, Floss, and is titled ‘A Coronal’.<sup>133</sup>

It was composed in response to Williams’s death in 1963. It is a chronological account of the relationship between the two poets, told by means of extracts from their writings. These writings are not limited to poetry, but include criticism and letters. The collage-like poem ends with a reproduction of Williams’s signature as it appeared in the inscription in Zukofsky’s copy of Williams’s *Pictures from Brueghel*. “A”-17 was not Zukofsky’s only poetic tribute to Williams. ‘William Carlos Williams

alive!’ also falls into the category. The lines of this poem are short, many of them with only one word, and they break up the syntax in a manner characteristic of Williams, after prepositions and articles, as in the following lines:

scape  
of a  
letter

soars  
with the  
rest of

<sup>132</sup> Zukofsky, “A” (University of California Press, 1978), p. 376.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., pp. 377-388.

the letter (CSP 148-149)

This is not simply an imitation of a Williams poem, however. Zukofsky contributes something of his own. 'Scape' is 'the basal segment of an insect's antenna, esp. when it is enlarged and lengthened',<sup>134</sup> or 'the conspicuous joint of the *Antennae*'. It can mean 'the shaft of a column', 'a stem or stalk', or in Gerard Manley Hopkins's terms, 'a reflection or impression of the individual quality of a thing or action'.<sup>135</sup> Zukofsky seems to be referring to the shape of the letter W itself, focusing on the written nature of minimal unit of the letter, and thus on the materiality of language.

Zukofsky's tributes to Williams acknowledge the personal relationship between the two men. Zukofsky's wife and son appear frequently in his poems, so writing for or about Williams as a friend seems natural. His poems about the important people in his life serve as illustrations of the importance to him of 'certain lasting emotions' as 'the core of the matter' in poetry. Whether he intended it or not, these poems also imply Zukofsky's participation in the Modernist revolution, as Rifkin and Stanley have suggested. By incorporating Williams into his poetry, Zukofsky both helped to establish a tradition and placed himself in a poetic lineage. Younger poets who looked not only to Williams, but to Zukofsky himself, would follow this practice, as we will see in the next chapter.

The economy Zukofsky admired and sought to encourage in Williams's writing was perhaps what also drew him to the work of Charles Reznikoff. Although Reznikoff composed longer works, including *Testimony*, which was published in three volumes over a number of years, according to Michael Heller, 'the short two or three-

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<sup>134</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, tenth edition.

<sup>135</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition.



line poem' is 'one of Reznikoff's trademarks'.<sup>136</sup> Paul Auster concurs, and even suggests that Reznikoff's longer works follow from the tiny poems he calls 'the Ur-texts of Reznikoff's imagination'.<sup>137</sup> One such poem is 'April':

The stiff lines of the twigs  
blurred by buds.<sup>138</sup>

Others are even shorter. 'The Bridge' has but one line and six words:

In a cloud bones of steel.<sup>139</sup>

Although the words are simple and few, there is some poetic fashioning in 'The Bridge'. The words are an inversion of the way one might normally say them: bones of steel in a cloud. Both poems are examples of Reznikoff's 'haiku style', which he developed after a friend's detailed analysis of one of his early poems made Reznikoff realise that his legal training, 'reading cases closely for the meaning of every word', could be applied to his poetry. He learned then to do away with the 'negligible or superfluous' in favour of the essential,<sup>140</sup> and what was left was often very brief indeed. But as the poems above attest, he succeeded in his effort to 'cut out everything that wasn't interesting in the hope that what was left would be'.<sup>141</sup>

Reznikoff's 'obsession to cut and keep cutting'<sup>142</sup> extended beyond his own work. In his editorial capacity at *Jewish Frontier*, a Zionist publication with which his wife, Marie Syrkin, was involved, Syrkin says 'I had to contain his natural inclination to reduce pages to paragraphs and paragraphs to sentences'.<sup>143</sup> Reznikoff even

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<sup>136</sup> Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches*, p. 66.

<sup>137</sup> Auster, 'The Decisive Moment', in *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, edited by Milton Hindus (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1984), p. 152.

<sup>138</sup> *Poems 1918-1975: The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, edited by Seamus Cooney (Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 36.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>140</sup> Dembo, Interview with Reznikoff, p. 199.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>142</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Reznikoff's Nearness', in *The Objectivist Nexus*, p. 213.

<sup>143</sup> Quoted in Bernstein, 'Reznikoff's Nearness', p. 214. See also Marie Syrkin, 'Charles: A Memoir', in Hindus, editor, *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, p. 54.

manages to cut down Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', where there is 'a phrase that is completely unnecessary'.<sup>144</sup> Reznikoff would pare Pound's original,

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet black bough.

to

Faces in a crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

If this can be considered an example of Reznikoff's haiku style, it is a reduction even of that form. Whereas a haiku consists of three lines of five, then seven, and finally five syllables, Reznikoff's version of Pound drops the final five-syllable line. One might argue that in Reznikoff's rendition something of the musicality of the original is lost, but the full power of the image is retained. Clearly Reznikoff was a master of the rigours of reduction.

Like Williams and the other Objectivists, Reznikoff limited his subject matter by focusing on sensory data. Auster opens his essay on Reznikoff by proclaiming 'Charles Reznikoff is a poet of the eye'.<sup>145</sup> The title of Auster's piece, 'The Decisive Moment', is taken from photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. Reznikoff made himself a camera, Auster suggests, by effacing his ego or personal presence and serving as a device recording what he encountered on his daily walks, miles long, through New York City. Michael Heller takes the analogy with photography a bit further, noting that in Reznikoff, 'in place of reliance on symbol and metaphor there is realistic, almost photographic precision of language'.<sup>146</sup> There are two aspects of 'poetry of the eye'. One requires the suppression of the subjectivity of the poet, and the other the elimination of poetic language. 'Heat Wave: Third Day' exemplifies these aspects:

<sup>144</sup> Janet Sternburg and Alan Ziegler, 'A Conversation with Charles Reznikoff', in *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet*, p. 130. The difference in punctuation in the two versions appears in the interview.

<sup>145</sup> Paul Auster, 'The Decisive Moment', p. 151.

<sup>146</sup> Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches*, p. 59.

In the blaze of sunshine,  
 an old man comes slowly down the empty street  
 pushing the heavy cart  
 in which he gathers corrugated paper and iron scrap

A young Negro is bending over a pressing-machine  
 in the tailorshop on the corner,  
 the white steam rising into his face.<sup>147</sup>

As with Williams's 'snapshot' poems, these images are not entirely static. There is the movement of the old man struggling to push his cart along the street, and the 'young Negro' is clearly engaged in performing a task. No attempt is made to interpret these scenes. The poet merely records them, leaving it to the reader to make of them what they will. Perhaps the '*white steam*', which must be uncomfortably hot and intrusively rises into the man's face as he labours, is suggestive of racial oppression. On the other hand, steam simply appears white, and Reznikoff takes note of that objective fact.

Charles Bernstein stresses the effort involved in the shaping of the language of the poem, and vehemently rejects descriptions of Reznikoff's poems as 'reports of things seen'. To talk of Reznikoff's work in this way is to accept the 'narrow definition of the "Objectivist" as ocular or transparent imagism' and to neglect 'objectification', or the poem as object, he argues.<sup>148</sup> Bernstein is concerned that Reznikoff has not achieved the recognition accorded writers such as Pound or Joyce or Eliot, and believes the conception of his poems as simple, transparent recordings is to blame. If, however, the 'opacity' of the poetry, its qualities as an object, which give evidence of the skill required to shape it, is adequately considered, Reznikoff's work will be taken more seriously.<sup>149</sup>

The word that Bernstein takes as emblematic of views responsible for the misrepresentation and under-appreciation of Reznikoff is 'flatness'. Reznikoff himself

<sup>147</sup> Reznikoff, *Poems 1918-1975*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>148</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Reznikoff's Nearness', p. 226.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

rejects the term ‘flat’ as a description of his poetry, Bernstein remarks, and instead points to the rhythm, musicality, and passion of the poems.<sup>150</sup> Bernstein seems to conceive of the term ‘flat’ as indicating the use of words in an unremarkable way that allows them to function purely for their referential quality. But flatness can serve to draw attention to the language, to the poem as object, to the words themselves. The language of Williams and Stein—and, I would argue, Reznikoff—is remarkable precisely because in its flatness it breaks the mould of the ‘calcified grammatical constructions’ and poetic forms that, through habitual use, are no longer visible (or viable). Flatness, as a departure from typical poetic diction, makes the poem opaque, as Bernstein would have it be.

One way Reznikoff’s poetry is flat is by virtue of its paratactic arrangements, a feature Bernstein acknowledges.<sup>151</sup> One of the best examples is found in the selections from *My Country, ‘Tis of Thee* that appeared in the “*Objectivists*” *Anthology*. Reznikoff constructed this work out of ‘facts’, ‘phrases’, and ‘sentences’ from legal records,<sup>152</sup> as he did with *Testimony* and *Holocaust*. Some parts consist of noun phrases, at times just proper nouns, set alongside one another, as in this list of identifications:

Little Ferriby, Morning, Mahala, Big Ferriby, Old Nancy, negresses; Mingo, Cupid, and Jack, Negroes; and the mulattoes, Aquila Seay, Beddo, Jincy West, and Sandy Spriggs. Mr. Rodenhiser, the “founderer” of the blast furnace at Rural Retreat, Wythe County; George Rundle, the combmaker; Grizzle, a bankrupt drunkard; Comfort Sands and William Keach, bankrupts; Serpentine, a criminal; John Burgess, whipped for stealing hogs; Thomas Glaze, indicted for adultery; Fortunatus Violet, “penurious to a groat”, and never known to speak a good word of anybody. Lorenzo Johnson, known as “Renzy” Johnson; “China” Hobson, whose real name was Tescharner Hobson; Cyprian Webster, John Trimble, Claudius Smith, Greenwood Leflore, George Vaughn, John Yancy, Ethelwin Oliver, Silenus Sadler, Seafroy

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, pp. 233-234.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>152</sup> Reznikoff, From *My Country, ‘Tis of Thee*, in *An “Objectivists” Anthology* (To Publishers, 1932; reprint, Folcraft Library Editions, 1975), p. 92.

Oliver, Andrew Ice, Wade Hampton, Tristram Tarver, Leonard Fash, Martin Very, Tyrus Bell, Tittle, Mask, Grammar, Timoleon Cravens, Job Smith, and Newton St. John; Lydia Bastable, Sabina Carter, Ann Croft, Sylvia Dale, Cypressa Vance, and Amaranth Phillips.<sup>153</sup>

Glimpses of the lives of these people are afforded, and that, as well as the recording of their existence, was surely part of Reznikoff's intention. But most striking are the words themselves, their individual sonic qualities and the musical effect of the arrangement Reznikoff gave them. 'My own belief', Reznikoff said, 'is to name and to name and to name—and to name in such a way that you have rhythm, since music ... is also part of the meaning'.<sup>154</sup> He seems to have been describing the concept of 'sincerity' that Zukofsky found exemplified in Reznikoff's writing. The selection from *My Country*, *'Tis of Thee* is flat in that the elements are not subordinated syntactically. Grammatical structure is eliminated, resulting in enhanced musicality of the poetic object.

Bernstein also rejects 'absence of rhetoric' as a feature of Reznikoff's poetry.<sup>155</sup> But Reznikoff's avoidance of explicit judgement in his poetry does amount to the eschewal of persuasion. Quoting from his own writing, Reznikoff describes his abstention from comment, and relates it to his sense of the meaning of 'Objectivist':

'By the term "objectivist" I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject matter and, if he writes in verse, by its music.' Now suppose in a court of law, you are testifying in a negligence case. You cannot get up on the stand and say, 'The man was negligent'. That's a conclusion of fact. What you'd be compelled to say is how the man acted. Did he stop before he crossed the street? Did he look? The judges of whether he is negligent or not are the jury in that case and the judges of what you say as a poet are the readers. That is, there is an analogy between testimony in the courts and the testimony of the poet.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-93.

<sup>154</sup> Dembo, Interview with Reznikoff, pp. 193-194.

<sup>155</sup> Bernstein, p. 226.

<sup>156</sup> Dembo, Interview with Reznikoff, pp. 194-195. Reznikoff is quoting something he has written, hence the quotation marks.

Reznikoff's legal training is in evidence here, as it is in the court records he used for material in works like that quoted above and in *Holocaust* and *Testimony*. The latter work, especially, is long, covering three volumes, and yet the elimination of judgement in it is a strategy of reduction. Heller says that 'The poetry has about it a "documentary" effect, one that is both tactful and powerful by virtue of its being stripped, it would seem, of any attempt by the poet to persuade'.<sup>157</sup> Reznikoff's approach here is like Hemingway's doctrine of presenting the 'actual things ... which produced the emotion ... the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion'.<sup>158</sup> In Reznikoff's formulation, 'I can only say what I saw and heard, and I try to say it as well as I can. And if your conclusion is that what I saw and heard makes you feel the way I did, then the poem is successful'.<sup>159</sup> By keeping the materials of the poem to a minimum, but using artistic skill to shape their presentation, Reznikoff hoped to fulfil what he saw as the essential function of poetry.

Lorine Niedecker was not published in the special Objectivist issue of *Poetry* in 1931. But she wrote to introduce herself to Zukofsky after she read it. The two met and, after a brief affair, began 'an extended correspondence that profoundly shaped the work of both poets'.<sup>160</sup> The letters from Zukofsky to Niedecker, spanning a period of thirty years, constitutes the 'largest, most informative file' of correspondence in Zukofsky's papers, despite the fact that Niedecker 'censored the letters by cutting them into fragments'.<sup>161</sup> Had she not seen the Objectivists issue in 1931, she

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<sup>157</sup> Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches*, p. 61.

<sup>158</sup> Phillips, ed., *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, p. 29.

<sup>159</sup> Dembo, Interview with Reznikoff, p. 195.

<sup>160</sup> Burton Hatlen, 'A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: Objectivist Poets in Context', in *The Objectivist Nexus*, p. 38.

<sup>161</sup> Marcella Booth, 'The Zukofsky Papers: The Cadence of a Life', in Terrell, ed., *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, pp. 393-394.

remarked, 'I feel I'd never have developed as a poet'.<sup>162</sup> Niedecker's and Zukofsky's poetry resemble one another primarily in the emphasis both place on musicality. Niedecker felt a strong 'kinship' too with Charles Reznikoff, with whom she also corresponded, in their short poetry, in their obscurity as poets, and in their modest sensibilities.<sup>163</sup>

Niedecker excelled in the art of reduction. Her poems 'are made with such strictness, such rigor to say no more than what must be said' and are therefore 'less in danger of being misunderstood than of being overlooked'.<sup>164</sup> But Niedecker's method of making small was not the editorial 'cutting' favoured by Zukofsky, Williams, and Reznikoff. Instead, one of her 'self-imposed rules', she wrote to Cid Corman in 1962, 'has always been condense, condense'.<sup>165</sup> Though the rule may have been self-imposed, the influence of, or at least the affinity with, Zukofsky is likely to have been a factor in Niedecker's choice of it. Niedecker acknowledged Zukofsky as a 'mentor', and the two poets had ample opportunity to exchange ideas during the thirty years over which they corresponded. There is an echo in Niedecker's remarks of Zukofsky's ideas about the 'condensation' of finer mathematics being analogous to the composition of fine poetry and his statement that 'condensation is more than half of composition'. The term 'condense', in fact, was so important to Niedecker's practice that the title of one collection of her work, *This Condensery*, derives from it. 'Condensery' comes from Niedecker's 'Poet's Work'<sup>166</sup>:

Grandfather  
advised me:

<sup>162</sup> Kenneth Cox, 'The Poems of Lorine Niedecker', *The Cambridge Quarterly* 4 (1969), p. 175.

<sup>163</sup> Robert Francosi, 'Reading Reznikoff: Zukofsky, Oppen, and Niedecker', in DuPlessis and Quartermain, eds., *The Objectivist Nexus*, pp. 268-273.

<sup>164</sup> Heller, *Conviction's Net of Branches*, p. 54.

<sup>165</sup> Quoted in Jane Augustine, 'The Evolution of Matter: Lorine Niedecker's Aesthetic', *Sagetrieb* 1:2 (Fall 1982), p. 278.

<sup>166</sup> *From This Condensery: The Complete Writings of Lorine Niedecker*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (The Jargon Society, 1985), p. 141.

Learn a trade

I learned  
to sit at desk  
and condense.

No layoffs  
from this  
condensery.

By means of the analogy of writing with labour and of poem as product, Niedecker played with the Objectivist notion of the poem as object, and echoed Zukofsky's notion of poems 'as jobs'.<sup>167</sup> The Objectivists did not just think of poems as objects, but struggled to attain a state of concreteness, of objecthood, in their writing. Niedecker looked for what is elemental, as enduring as rock or iron, in fragile human existence in 'Lake Superior', 'that spare ferropastoral of a poem'<sup>168</sup>:

In every part of every living thing  
is stuff that once was rock

In blood the minerals  
of the rock<sup>169</sup>

Language may not contain rock, but resembles it. In the notebooks she filled while on the tour of the Great Lakes region that inspired 'Lake Superior', Niedecker wrote: 'The North is one vast, massive, glorious corruption of rock and language', and 'People of all nationalities and color have changed the language like weather and pressure have changed the rocks'.<sup>170</sup> Niedecker was fascinated by the history of words, but not merely for their own sake. Her encounter with them was rooted in sensory experience of the most physical kind, that of touch:

Greek named  
Exodus-antique  
kicked up in America's

<sup>167</sup> Zukofsky, "'Recencies" in Poetry', *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, p. 25.

<sup>168</sup> Douglas Crase, 'On Lorine Niedecker', *Raritan* 12:2 (Fall 1992), p. 47.

<sup>169</sup> Lorine Niedecker, From 'Lake Superior', *North Central* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1968), pages unnumbered.

<sup>170</sup> Quoted in Crase, p. 65.



Northwest  
 you have been in my mind  
 between my toes  
 agate<sup>171</sup>

Niedecker's use of historical documents and allusions to literary forebears in 'Lake Superior' might seem to be a violation of the principle of reduction, but her strategy was to 'reduce your precursor errors to their constituent elements, and poems can be made again, not of words, but of stone'.<sup>172</sup> As Donald Davie points out, Niedecker's use of historical materials 'is profoundly *unhistorical*', and 'the minerals of the Lake Superior region are in a real sense the only true "heroes" of the poem';<sup>173</sup> she focused on what is elemental.

Niedecker's subjects were often ordinary, and she frequently wrote in 'the speech of the American people, whittled clean'.<sup>174</sup> These features of her poetry may serve the Minimalist impulse, but Niedecker had additional methods of reduction at her disposal. One of the brief poems published in *My Friend Tree* in 1961 is an object that confronts the ear:

Lights, lifts  
 parts nicely opposed  
 this white  
     lice lithe  
 pink bird<sup>175</sup>

Niedecker's play with the sound in this poem brings to mind Zukofsky. One notices here the sounds more than any visual image, the 'nicely opposed' short and long 'i' sounds, occurring in all but two of the words. A minimal picture is sketched with two colours, but the sound quality renders the poem opaque, resisting the need to go

<sup>171</sup> Niedecker, From 'Lake Superior', *North Central*.

<sup>172</sup> Crase, p. 61.

<sup>173</sup> Donald Davie, 'Lyric Minimum and Epic Scope: Lorine Niedecker', *Sagetrieb* 1:2 (Fall 1982), p. 276.

<sup>174</sup> Cox, 'The Poems of Lorine Niedecker', p. 169.

<sup>175</sup> *The Granite Pail: The Selected Poems of Lorine Niedecker*, ed. Cid Corman (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), p. 32.

beyond its musicality. The reader is forced to participate in the reduction of attention to the auditory sense. If there was a basis for this poem in visual experience it is barely discernible; after passing through Niedecker's condensery it has been transformed into an aural object of the poet's manufacture.

'I having come so far we shall have/ Song // Let it be small enough.'<sup>176</sup> So the value of poetic reduction is proclaimed by George Oppen. The sentiment is somewhat similar to that in Williams's 'The Poem' (*CP* 2 74):

It's all in  
the sound. A song.  
Seldom a song. It should

be a song—made of  
particulars

And it should be 'something / immediate'. Oppen's approach was not like that of Williams in that he did not write a great deal and then reduce it by making editorial cuts. Instead, he would begin with careful selection of materials, choosing only those absolutely necessary, and then fit them together in the neatest possible manner.

Williams praised Oppen's 'craftsmanlike economy of means' in a review of *Discrete Series* (1934):

His poems seek an irreducible minimum in the means for the achievement of their objective, no loose bolts or beams sticking out unattached at one end or put there to hold up a rococo cupid or a concrete saint.<sup>177</sup>

The idea of the poet as craftsman or 'wordsmith' was also expressed by Zukofsky,<sup>178</sup> and shared by Oppen. For Oppen, the poem was an object and the poet a maker who

<sup>176</sup> George Oppen, From 'Route', *Of Being Numerous* (New Directions, 1968), p. 54.

<sup>177</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'The New Poetical Economy', in Burton Hatlen, editor, *George Oppen: Man and Poet* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1981), p. 269. Note the analogy with the Minimalist style of Modernist architecture.

<sup>178</sup> Dembo, Interview with Zukofsky, p. 205.

must have a sense of 'the necessity for forming a poem properly',<sup>179</sup> making use of only a few materials:

Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man's way of  
thought and one of his dialects and what has happened  
to me  
Have made poetry<sup>180</sup>

The making is guided by the principle of clarity, which serves to reduce stylistically, to keep the clean and simple lines of the construction free of 'loose bolts or beams sticking out' or frivolous ornamentation, and defines the limits of what is necessary for the object:

Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful  
thing in the world  
A limited, limiting clarity

I have not and never did have any motive of poetry  
But to achieve clarity<sup>181</sup>

Oppen strove for clear presentation of 'the substantive, ... the subject of the sentence, ... not rushing over the subject-matter in order to make a comment about it',<sup>182</sup> just as Hemingway avoided narratorial comment and Reznikoff presented facts but refused to pass judgement. This principle is beautifully illustrated in a brief poem from *Discrete Series*:

The edge of the ocean,  
The shore: here  
Somebody's lawn,  
By the water.<sup>183</sup>

Here there is no comment, the subject of the sentence stands alone, without a predicate. The only statement made is that it exists. Such 'empirical statements' are

<sup>179</sup> Dembo, Interview with Oppen, p. 160.

<sup>180</sup> Oppen, *Of Being Numerous*, p. 14.

<sup>181</sup> Oppen, 'Route', *Of Being Numerous*, p. 47.

<sup>182</sup> Dembo, Interview with Oppen, p. 161.

<sup>183</sup> Oppen, *Discrete Series* (The Objectivist Press, 1934; reprint, 1966), pages unnumbered.

the stuff from which Oppen aimed to construct not just a poem, but ‘a meaning’.<sup>184</sup>

There is an implication here that poetic language can relate to the world in a manner that is efficacious as well as accurate. A ‘discrete series’, Oppen pointed out, is a phrase in mathematics, referring to ‘a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each one of which is empirically true’.<sup>185</sup>

Alan Golding cautions us not to forget that Oppen was constructing a *series*. Many of what look like brief, individual poems are linked in a serial arrangement. We should realise that the Oppen ‘serial poem has a formal dialectic [‘between individual piece and whole sequence’] built into its very structure’.<sup>186</sup> ‘As Oppen’s “decisive expression,” “Of Being Numerous” makes explicit the question that *Discrete Series* left implicit: the relation of the individual to the group’.<sup>187</sup> The poem asks whether the concept of humanity, ‘without which we are really unable to exist’,<sup>188</sup> is valid, whether it can be adequately constructed from our empirical encounters with particular human beings. Although Golding’s argument stresses the dialectical nature of Oppen’s enquiry, and urges remembrance of the larger or more abstract term (‘series’ or ‘humanity’), Oppen said that ‘one is, after all, just oneself and in the end is rooted in the singular’.<sup>189</sup> And poetry is constructed from those ‘moments of conviction’ in which one believes in the truth of an empirically derived statement.<sup>190</sup>

The words ‘truth’, ‘honesty’, ‘sincerity’, and ‘conviction’ are prominent in Oppen’s statements on poetry. In attempting to describe the poetic attitude shared by the Objectivists he said that he personally felt ‘he was beginning from imagism as a

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<sup>184</sup> Dembo, Interview with Oppen, p. 161.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Alan Golding, ‘George Oppen’s Serial Poems’, in *The Objectivist Nexus*, p. 89.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>188</sup> Dembo, ‘Interview with Oppen’, p. 162.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

position of honesty'.<sup>191</sup> The honesty of Imagism derives from its basis in and focus on individual experiences and the evidence of the senses.

Modern American poetry begins with the determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and the color of our lives. Verse, which had become a rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation, was to the modernists a skill of accuracy, of precision, a test of truth.<sup>192</sup>

To allow poetry to expand to epic proportions or to address social or political concerns is to go beyond the proper scope of poetry, and so to jeopardise its truth or honesty. These beliefs support a poetics of reduced scale that came into conflict with Oppen's political beliefs. Oppen felt keenly the need for active involvement in social and political action. Yet he found himself unable to write poetry in service of the aims of the Communist Party, to which he belonged. As a result of this clash of convictions, he gave up writing poetry for many years.

By declining to write about politics, Oppen reduced his poetry thematically. He also reduced his verse by training the focus on the elements of which it was composed, restricting his vocabulary and the length of lines in order to emphasise individual words and their syntactic roles. This endeavour is not unrelated to Oppen's concern with truth in poetry. Oppen 'invites, indeed compels, his readers to reflect on how language, on the simplest levels of syntax, mediates perception'.<sup>193</sup> 'We must think what is being asserted', Oppen writes, 'in the "little" words—the words "and" and "but"—the word "is"'.<sup>194</sup> To determine what such words assert requires clarity, and to achieve the clarity Oppen values one must deal with language one word at a time, deflating the rhetorical bubbles with which social institutions—and poetry—have surrounded them. The project is difficult and requires care:

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>192</sup> Oppen, 'The Mind's Own Place', *Kulchur* 10 (Summer 1963), p. 2.

<sup>193</sup> Lowney, *The American Avant-Garde Tradition*, p. 130.

<sup>194</sup> Oppen, 'Statement on Poetics', *Sagetrieb* 3:3 (Winter 1984), p. 26. The concern with 'the little words', is, of course, one that Oppen shared with Zukofsky, but his choice of examples is different.

Possible  
 To use  
 Words provided one treat them  
 As enemies.  
 Not enemies—Ghosts  
 Which have run mad  
 In the subways  
 And of course the institutions  
 And the banks. If one captures them  
 One by one proceeding

Carefully they will restore  
 I hope to meaning  
 And to sense.<sup>195</sup>

To restore to meaning is to make possible truth in language. Oppen was a realist insofar as he believed that truth inheres in a state of affairs in the world that exists independently of what one thinks or says about it.

There are words that mean nothing  
 But there is something to mean.  
 Not a declaration which is truth  
 But a thing  
 Which is.<sup>196</sup>

Truth in language is only possible with the proper relation of word to world, and words that mean nothing because of improper use must be ‘captured one by one’ and ‘restored to meaning’.

This process resembles the ‘disinfecting’ of words Williams praised in Stein, and as Hugh Kenner points out, is akin to Hemingway’s refusal of rhetoric in favour of the ‘One True Sentence’, both critics remarking the mixture of moral and technical concerns. Oppen’s insistence on craftsmanship and clarity, on attention to the assertions made by the ‘little’ words, and on honesty, sincerity, and truth, and his willingness to give up poetry rather than compromise its integrity suggest that his belief in technical precision has moral implications. For Oppen, working with

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<sup>195</sup> Oppen, ‘A Language of New York’, *This in Which* (New Directions, 1965), p. 39

<sup>196</sup> Oppen, ‘The Building of the Skyscraper’, *This in Which*, p. 73.

technical precision and restraining poetry in scope and size is the way to achieve honesty in poetry. A method of reduction serves these aims.

The relationship between language and the world that such American Modernists as Hemingway, Williams, and the Objectivists strove to renew is the basis for a certain sort of realism. By 'realism' here I mean a belief that the world exists independently of thought or linguistic statements about it together with a correspondence theory of truth in which states of affairs in the world serve as the standards by which the truth of a statement is determined. Rejecting the abstract rhetoric of war that obscured its horrors, Hemingway sought a language that conformed more closely to the contours of the world. The Objectivist value of 'sincerity' was one that privileged perception (the apprehension of 'the detail, not the mirage, of seeing') as in closer accordance with reality than 'knowledge', or preconceived ideas or images. Williams's commitment to realism is clear in his desire to wash words clean and for 'an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from "reality"'.<sup>197</sup> Forms, like preconceptions, can obscure the view of the details.

The Modernists discussed above were acknowledged formal innovators, and the source of their invention seems to lie in their very commitment to realism. Literary experiments were often undertaken as a reaction against established conventions of literary 'realism'. The problem was that these conventions had become 'calcified' and 'stultified' and had therefore lost any power to represent clearly or accurately. The solution was 'to say things simply so they will affect us as new

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<sup>197</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, in *Imaginations*, p. 102.

again',<sup>198</sup> to find a new, pared-down means of expression that more closely accorded to reality as perceived and experienced. The experimental nature of these attempts made them appear strange, and their contrast with the conventional realism of their immediate predecessors (and many of their contemporaries) has tended to obscure the realist premises on which they are based.

The status of language and literature as a language-based art was a related concern. In addressing the question of the relationship between language and the world, these writers also confronted the issue of the status of language in the world. What they seem to have desired was that language be unambiguous, stable, something solid and reliable. Hemingway strove to create 'a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive'.<sup>199</sup> Williams worked to write poetry that was capable of taking its place alongside other things in the world, an 'imitation' of nature rather than a 'copy' of it. His famous description of a poem as a 'machine made of words' vividly conveys his sense of the poem as a real *thing*. Zukofsky's concept of objectification, inspired by Reznikoff's work, is a declaration of the status of the poem as an object in the world like any other. Niedecker's metaphorical equation of language with iron and rock suggests the impulse to find what is solid and lasting in it. Oppen insists that in order to achieve truth, one must make with language not a 'declaration', but a 'thing'.

If language can be seen as taking part in reality, then its truthfulness is stabilised. In order to make it possible to see literary works of art as things in the world, these artists engaged in reductive practices. As Williams put it in expressing his admiration for Stein,

It is simply the skeleton, the 'formal' parts of writing, those that make form, that she has to do with, apart from the 'burden' which they carry. The skeleton, important to acknowledge where confusion of all

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<sup>198</sup> Louis Zukofsky, in a letter to Harriet Monroe, as quoted in Dembo, Interview with Zukofsky, p. 203.

<sup>199</sup> Plimpton, 'An Interview with Ernest Hemingway', p. 38.



knowledge of the 'soft parts' reigns at the present day in all intellectual fields.<sup>200</sup>

By reducing literature to the skeleton, to the essentials of its construction, the objecthood of the literary artwork is made visible, dispelling confusion, and making it possible to relate words to reality, to say something true. This is one lesson Minimalist writers can be said to have learned from Modernism.

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<sup>200</sup> Williams, 'The Work of Gertrude Stein', *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 115.

## CHAPTER 2: *Robert Creeley, Aram Saroyan, and Robert Grenier*

### *Robert Creeley*

Robert Creeley now stands as a respected elder statesman of American poetry. His personal contacts with figures of his own generation such as Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg put him at the centre of innovative poetic activity in the 1950s and 1960s that gave shape and direction to much subsequent poetry in America. Creeley, Olson, and Ginsberg were all followers of William Carlos Williams in their concept of poetic form. They rejected the notion of form as something imposed upon content, something into which content must be made to fit, a notion they associated with T. S. Eliot and the New Critics. Instead, their motto was ‘form is never more than an extension of content’, a slogan coined by Creeley and included in Olson’s famous essay ‘Projective Verse’.

But while Olson’s and Ginsberg’s styles are expansive, and their subject matter extends to history and social issues, Creeley’s own style is decidedly Minimalist. His structures are subject to formal reduction: it is not at all unusual for his lines to contain one, two, or three words, or his stanzas a mere half-dozen; some entire poems have only a few words. His focus, too, remains small, on the context of composition, on the personal, domestic, and mundane, or on the words themselves. These reductive tendencies form part of the legacy Creeley inherited from Williams and the Objectivists.

Creeley’s Minimalist practice in itself makes him a suitable candidate for inclusion in this study. But he is also important as a mediating figure who learned Minimalist principles from writers of an earlier generation and whose own adaptation of and practice in Minimalist poetics served as an example for younger writers,

including the two who will also be discussed in this chapter, Aram Saroyan and Robert Grenier. Creeley, Saroyan, and Grenier use Minimalist techniques to explore the nature of their art, to find what is essential to it, which suggests they think there is something 'real' there to be found, that poetry has a heart, core, or essence. All three poets seem committed to grounding their work in the context of its composition and in the personal and mundane details of their lives. Those features of experience are indisputable and verifiable. They provide a solid foundation for the writing that the poets struggle to maintain against the vagueness and ambiguity of language. Often, therefore, language itself becomes the subject of poetic enquiry, and these poets examine its minute particulars in an effort to pin it down.

In 'Robert Creeley on the Ground', Stephen Fredman argues that Creeley's relationship to the word is a peculiarly American one. In seeking to 'ground' his poetry in the context of its composition, and in his treatment of words as objects, says Fredman, Creeley participates in a distinctly American tradition running from Emerson and the Transcendentalists, through Modernism, Imagism, Objectivism, and Projectivism.<sup>201</sup> Creeley does more than just participate in this tradition, I will argue, but he actively seeks to create it, and to insert himself within it. One of the ways in which he attempts this is by means of poetic tributes to those whose work he wishes to both promote and emulate, those whom he wants to be seen as a forming the tradition in which he wishes to participate.

The idea of poems as machines built from word-objects and that of poetry grown organically in the garden plot of local speech patterns and relationships might seem to be incompatible with one another. According to Robert von Hallberg, Creeley

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<sup>201</sup> Fredman, *North Dakota Quarterly* 55:4 (Fall 1987), pp. 99-100.

uses the discrepancy: 'his method is [...] to set at odds a personal subject matter and an abstract, generalized manner of treatment'.<sup>202</sup> I agree with von Hallberg that the tension between the intensely personal, the immediate context of composition, and an objectified view of language is the crux of Creeley's poetry, but would add that it is intimately bound up with his Minimalism. Basing one's poetry on the local, on individualised speech patterns, and on personal, immediate circumstances is a reductive act, the result of a narrowed focus. And the focus on the word as object is effected in Creeley by Minimalist means. He uses short lines that emphasise individual words or break them up. By continually interrupting phrases at the end of the line, he disrupts the reading process. Phrases are often taken whole when reading, but Creeley's line breaks force attention to the individual word rather than allowing them to be resolved into the larger unit of the phrase. It is by way of Minimalism that Creeley approaches, in his best poems, the point at which local and personal meet general and abstract. When the personal is rendered in Minimalist fashion, with only what is essential to it, it takes on an abstract quality.

Creeley's sense of himself as American is quite clear in 'A Note' at the end of *Hello*, a book composed on a long trip overseas.

I went because I wanted to—to look, to see, even so briefly, how people in those parts of the world made a reality, to talk of being American, of the past war, of power, of usual life in this country, of my fellow and sister poets, of my neighbors on Fargo Street in Buffalo, New York. I wanted, at last, to be *human*, however simplistic that wish. I took thus my own chances, and remarkably found a company.<sup>203</sup>

Significantly, Creeley finds commonality with people of other nationalities *through* his personal identity as American. He speaks of 'a reality' here as a personal or local or regional matter. Human experience is grounded in personal details of place and

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<sup>202</sup> Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 51

<sup>203</sup> Creeley, *Hello: A Journal, February 29-May 3, 1976* (New York: New Directions, 1978), p. 85.

acquaintance. This idea is even linked to a figure who looms large in American poetic history. Creeley has said that ‘if Whitman has taught me anything, and he has taught me a great deal, often against my own will, it is that the common *is* personal, intensely so’.<sup>204</sup>

Related, too, is the idea of ‘the local’ that Creeley emphasises in William Carlos Williams (*CE* 30-39). Creeley expresses his own commitment to the local when he says that ‘poetry as an art is at risk when it moves into an intentional international condition. When it thinks to be international, it’s peculiarly of no interest whatsoever’.<sup>205</sup> It was in the introduction to *The Wedge*, a document that Creeley said in a recent interview ‘is a manifesto for me, then and forever’,<sup>206</sup> that Williams famously described a poem as ‘a small (or large) machine made of words’, a construction made of words as objects. Yet it was here, too, that Williams took pains to locate the value of the poem-machine in the speech patterns of the poet, saying that ‘it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which they most resemble the machine, to give language its highest dignity, its illumination in the environment to which it is native’.<sup>207</sup> In reduced, Minimalist form, the intimate and local appear abstract and universal.

The heritage of Creeley’s native environment, New England, was important to his way of speaking, and hence to his poetry. His ‘Puritan’ heritage comes up a number of times in Tom Clark’s *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place* and the ‘Poet’s Own Autobiography’ in it. Creeley regards his specific location and heritage as determining in part how his poetry turns out, and he

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<sup>204</sup> *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (University of California Press, 1989), p. 3. Subsequent references will appear in the text with the abbreviation *CE*.

<sup>205</sup> Tom Clark, *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place* (New York: New Directions, 1993), p. 109.

<sup>206</sup> David Andrews, ‘Getting Said What Must Be: A Brief Conversation with Robert Creeley’ (June 2002). *Bridge* 2:1 (Fall/Winter 2002), p. 172.

<sup>207</sup> ‘Author’s Introduction’, *The Wedge*, pp. 8, 10-11.

has repeatedly commented 'on the New England predisposition to make each word count, just as the geographical conditions insist on an economy of natural resources'.<sup>208</sup> The laconic New England way of speaking thus is an element of his personality, and in this way his Minimalism connects up with the Open Field poetics of Olson, in which poetry is tied to the breath and speech of the poet.

Creeley's relationship with Williams seems to have been important to him on a personal level as well as a professional one. Creeley and Williams began corresponding in 1950 (the same year in which he and Olson began writing to one another), and first met in 1955.<sup>209</sup> As recently as 2002, Creeley recalled Williams's death as a salient event in the particularly troubling years of 1962-63, during which Creeley's daughter also died.<sup>210</sup> Lynn Keller argues that Williams provided Creeley with a model for the presentation of intimate and sexual content in his poetry (something that Olson and Pound could not do), and suggests that the older poet's use of line breaks was particularly useful for Creeley in conveying emotion.<sup>211</sup> As Charles Altieri says, 'in effect, Creeley turns Williams's and Zukofsky's objectivist poetics into a model for handling our obsessions with interiority'.<sup>212</sup>

One of the ways Creeley chose to deal with the implications of Williams and Zukofsky for his own work was by writing tribute poems to them. In doing so, he is also establishing them as poetic forebears worthy of emulation, and insinuating himself within the tradition that they represent and that he is helping to establish. In the most striking of Creeley's poems entitled 'For W.C.W.'<sup>213</sup> it is the sense of words

<sup>208</sup> Arthur L. Ford, *Robert Creeley* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), p. 16.

<sup>209</sup> Paul Mariani, 'Fire of a Very Real Order: Creeley and Williams', *Boundary 2* 6:3 (Spring-Fall 1978), pp. 175, 186.

<sup>210</sup> 'Yesterdays', *Yesterdays* (Tucson, Arizona: Chax Press, 2002), n.p.

<sup>211</sup> Keller, *Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 140-141.

<sup>212</sup> Altieri, 'Creeley's Contemporaneity', *Bridge* 2:1 (Fall/Winter 2002), p. 201.

<sup>213</sup> Creeley, *Selected Poems, 1945-1990* (London: Marion Boyars, 1991), p. 93. Subsequent references will appear in the text with the abbreviation *SP*.

as objects that is most obvious, though desire figures as well. In fact, the poem serves as an excellent example of the way Creeley manages to conjoin intensive focus on the elements of language and human emotion.

The rhyme is after  
all the repeated  
insistence.

There, you say, and  
there, and there,  
and *and* becomes

just so. And  
what one wants is  
what one wants,

yet complexly  
as you  
say.

Let's  
let it go.  
I want—

Then there is—  
and,  
I want.

As in so many of Creeley's poems, a demonstrative adverb, 'there', features prominently, beginning the second stanza and appearing in it three times. But the repetitions of 'there' are joined by 'and', and it is the conjunction that, surprisingly, becomes the centre of the poem. Usually 'and' is a word quickly passed over, but it is '*and*' itself that becomes 'just so', rather than the expected 'there'. We are invited to consider 'and' in its particularity, to think of its functions and qualities. Creeley heightens this effect by isolating the word. The placement of 'And' at the end of the first line of the next stanza, separated off and emphasised by the full stop preceding it and its initial capital, draws attention to it.

In effect, Creeley is using just the sort of enjambment Williams was partial to in order to break up phrases and emphasise connecting words such as conjunctions and prepositions. Creeley uses line breaks to lend significance to individual words, isolating individual words by means of the breaks and punctuation, and so making the word rather than the line the unit upon which he focuses. Furthermore, as I noted in the previous chapter with regard to Williams, words such as ‘and’ are important for their connecting functions as crucial working parts in a ‘machine made of words’. The Minimalist practice of isolating units such as words makes visible the structural components of the machine.

Just after the ‘And’ in the first line of the third stanza, the concept of desire is introduced: ‘what one wants is / what one wants’. By the end of the poem, ‘and’ itself becomes an indicator of desire, its grammatical function as conjunction necessarily reaching out for more, an acquisitive and accumulative impulse consistent with the ‘repeated / insistence’ of ‘I want’. The rhyme ‘is after’ the repetition according to Williams’s notion of rhyme as ‘implicit in parallel or recurrent thought patterns’, as Creeley put it in ‘A Quick Graph’ (*CE* 481).

The way Creeley breaks the lines in ‘For W.C.W.’ resembles Williams’s own use of enjambment. The older poet often broke his lines in the middle of a phrase, leaving a preposition or an article at the end, creating a pull toward the next line, but also drawing attention to the grammatical function of the word. The first few lines of ‘Between Walls’ (1938) will serve as an example:

the back wings  
of the

hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders (*CP I*, 453)



A particular Williams poem may be relevant to Creeley's 'For W.C.W.'. In 'Perpetuum Mobile: The City', from *Adam & Eve & The City* (1936), the phrase 'for love', which Creeley chose as the title of his first major collection, appears several times (*CP* 1,432-433). The poem also contains the lines

No end—  
There!  
There!  
There!  
—a dream  
of lights  
hiding (*CP* 1, 434)

Perhaps the 'there' that 'you say' three times in Creeley's poem for Williams comes from 'Perpetuum Mobile'. 'For W.C.W.' may also echo section 4 of Williams's 'A Folded Skyscraper', in which Williams indulges in a prose rant on Pound. Pound is, according to Williams, in the grip of a 'self-deception' about the sources of his poetry: Pound thinks of Dante and the Renaissance, when he is really 'a United States poet'. Pound's ability to remain an American poet despite his artificiality and his self-deceiving search for roots in Europe troubles Williams, who strives 'so wildly to possess' his country. Pound 'has taken the false, the make shift—the thing that they here—made him take—not the thing I want, but the thing I want' (*CP* 1, 276) words echoed in Creeley's poem.

Poems such as 'For W.C.W.' function as tributes to older poets, but also serve to proclaim their worth as literary forebears. The poet for whom the poem is written is held up as a model, and therefore these poems help to establish the sense of a tradition, while at the same time proclaiming the author's (in this case Creeley's) intention to be seen as taking part in that tradition himself. The Objectivist Louis

Zukofsky was another important literary predecessor for Creeley. ‘Creeley’, argues Fredman, ‘goes farther than any poet before him (with the possible exception of Louis Zukofsky) in treating words as objects with a right to stand on their own’.<sup>214</sup> Mark Scroggins recently suggested that Creeley’s entire oeuvre has its basis in Zukofsky’s, that Creeley’s ‘impressive (and continuing) body of work stands as a thorough working-through of the implications of the Zukofskyan short lyric and lyric sequence’.<sup>215</sup> Creeley has written affectionately about Zukofsky’s personal warmth and generosity, as well as his importance as a poetic forebear (CE 54-71).<sup>216</sup> He has also written poems for the older poet, and dedicated his 1969 book *Pieces* to Zukofsky.

‘The House (for Louis Zukofsky)’ (SP 80) is a formally typical Creeley poem. Its stanzas in regular groups of four extremely brief lines, some just a single word, its repetitions, and the placement of line breaks within the phrase mark it as Creeley’s. Yet Creeley has said that the poem ‘is really Louis’s—he took the baggage of my language and reduced it without threat to that compact, echoing sound’.<sup>217</sup> This claim functions to establish the personal and artistic link between the two poets. It places Creeley in the position of one who learned from Zukofsky and benefited from his editorial advice. It also suggests an accord between their poetic aims, and it seems significant that the action Zukofsky performed on the poem was one of reduction.<sup>218</sup>

Mud put  
upon mud,  
lifted

<sup>214</sup> Fredman, ‘Robert Creeley on the Ground’, p. 100.

<sup>215</sup> Scroggins, ‘Z-Sited Path: Late Zukofsky and His Tradition’, *The World in Time and Space: Towards a History of Innovative American Poetry in Our Time*, eds. Edward Foster and Joseph Donahue. *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 23-26 (2001-2002), p. 152.

<sup>216</sup> See also Creeley’s ‘Foreword’ to Zukofsky’s *Complete Short Poetry*, p. xiv.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>218</sup> Creeley extends the tradition further in a review of Zukofsky’s *All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923-1958* when he notes that Zukofsky’s ‘particular sensitivity to the qualities of poetry as “sight, sound, and intellection” marks the significance of his relation to Ezra Pound, who dedicated *Guide to Kulchur* “To Louis Zukofsky and Basil Bunting”’ (CE 56-57).

to make room,

house  
a cave,  
and  
colder night.

To sleep  
in, live in,  
to come in  
from heat,

all form derived  
from kind,  
built  
with that in mind.

The idea of 'form derived / from kind', 'Mud put / upon mud', suggests the self-sufficient integrity of the poem as a construction, as something made and thus with real existence in the world.<sup>219</sup> 'To make room' is ambiguous: it means both creating space *for*, making room *for*, and creating a physical space, making *a* room. The poem is not merely a conduit for meaning, nor is it made by means of imposing form on content. Instead it is a suitable dwelling for what lives in it, providing a place 'To sleep / in, live in, / to come in / from heat'. In 'The House' Creeley combines the idea of the poem as object with a sense of its personal use and associations.

The distinctive rhythm of the poem comes from the way Creeley breaks up the phrases into lines. He has described his use of line breaks as 'pivots', saying that they give him 'a way to ground and/or locate a rhythmic base'.<sup>220</sup> The third stanza, for example, sounds entirely different when the lines are grouped according to the phrase:

to sleep in,  
live in,  
to come in from heat

<sup>219</sup> The placement of 'upon' also seems a Williams-like gesture, similar to 'so much depends / upon' in 'The Red Wheelbarrow'. Williams, *CP I*, p. 224.

<sup>220</sup> David L. Elliott, 'An Interview with Robert Creeley', *Sagetrieb* 10:1-2 (Spring-Fall 1991), p. 58.

This version sounds quite conventional and rather stale, whereas Creeley's divisions give the lines an unexpected quality, a freshness and syncopated rhythm that perhaps owe something to his interest in jazz. Placing the break just after 'sleep' also makes it possible for the phrase to hover between two meanings. The infinitive 'to sleep' in the first line of the stanza is not the same as the phrase 'to sleep in', which describes the function of the titular house.

As the volume's title indicates, the poems in *Words* (1967)<sup>221</sup> focus on the language, on the objects from which poems are constructed, and the way they function in the system of language. For example, 'The Pattern' (49) begins

As soon as  
I speak, I  
speaks.

Creeley treats here the distancing effect of language use, the way in which, as poststructuralists would have it, the subject is merely a linguistic position represented by the pronoun 'I', an effect of language rather than something substantial.

In Creeley, such a seemingly abstract emphasis on language is often combined with the intensely personal. One of the most striking poems in *Words* (and Creeley's entire oeuvre) is 'The Language' (SP 96):

Locate I  
love you some-  
where in  
  
teeth and  
eyes, bite  
it but  
  
take care not  
to hurt, you  
want so  
  
much so

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<sup>221</sup> Creeley, *Words* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967). Subsequent references will appear in the text.

little. Words  
say everything.

I  
*love you*  
again,

then what  
is emptiness  
for. To

fill, fill.  
I have heard words  
and words full

of holes  
aching. Speech  
is a mouth.

There is a painful, 'aching' desire here to make speech real, to put linguistic expressions on the level of the physical, to grasp hold of the words by biting them, to bring the words, the mouth, and the eyes of the lover together in satisfying fullness, a whole, rather than a hole.

The grouping of words in Creeley's brief lines make for interesting ambiguity as the poem is read. By means of isolating words and breaking up phrases, Creeley forces an intensive focus on the individual words, refusing to let them become lost by being resolved into the meaning of the larger phrase. He also creates phrases other than those formed by the punctuation. Line three, 'where in', can be read as the beginning of a question. 'Eyes, bite' hints at a less than loving look. 'Take care not', in line seven, is a directive to accept the unrequited nature of one's affection. Is there a threat implicit in 'to hurt, you'? Or, together with the following two lines, is the beloved accused of sadistic intent: 'to hurt, you / want so // much so'?

Lines eleven and twelve amount to a platitude: 'little. Words / say everything', but may also allude to Zukofsky's insistence on the importance of the 'little words' such as 'the' and 'a', 'both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical

destiny as one man can perhaps resolve'.<sup>222</sup> The way the '*I*' is placed on a line apart from the rest of the phrase, '*love you*', indicates distance between the lover and the beloved, a gap or hole aching to be filled. Charles Altieri notes this effect in Creeley: 'The subject matter is enhanced by the nature of the poetic line itself, which directly manifests the sense of an ever-threatening void. The abruptness, the tortuous pausing demanded by the short line, evokes the sense that one is dangling at the edge of an abyss'.<sup>223</sup> The break between '*I*' and '*love you*' in the first and second lines illustrates Creeley's skill in manipulating his placement of line breaks. 'Locate *I*' implies an interest in the first-person pronoun as an element of language and as an indicator of self, but 'Locate *I / love you*' is emotional, an attempt to locate a feeling rather than a linguistic construct. By breaking his lines into small units within the phrase, Creeley manages to address both the abstract and the personal.

In the seventh stanza of 'The Language' there is brief promise, with the exhortation 'fill, fill' at the beginning, 'and words full' at the end. But this is all too short lived, as the next stanza brings a revision: what words are full of is holes, empty places. Yet, perhaps in the end there is a resolution offering some satisfaction. The placement of 'Speech / is a mouth' in the same stanza with the phrase 'holes / aching' is redolent of the painful nature of revealing one's most heartfelt emotions. At the same time, however, speech as a mouth *is* physical and substantial, something that can be taken hold of with the teeth or, more gently, used in carnal expressions of love.

Measure can be at once quite personal, reflecting individual, localised speech patterns, and at the same time abstract and universalised. The concept of measure, was, Creeley admitted, 'an issue more at root in Williams' sense of structure than even his insistence on the "local"' (CE 36). And Creeley himself claimed measure to

<sup>222</sup> Zukofsky, 'Poetry', *Prepositions* +, p. 10.

<sup>223</sup> Altieri, 'The Unsure Egoist: Robert Creeley and the Theme of Nothingness', *Contemporary Literature* 13:2, p. 163.

be his 'testament'. 'I am interested', says Creeley, 'to find that "automatic or inspirational speech tends everywhere to fall into metrical patterns" as E. R. Dodds notes in his *The Greeks and the Irrational* (CE 486). Olson remarks in 'Projective Verse' that the syllable is 'the king and pin of versification', and that one should attend to it carefully:

to step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language, is to engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical. Listening for the syllables must be so constant and so scrupulous, the exaction must be so complete, that the assurance of the ear is purchased at the highest—40 hours a day—price.<sup>224</sup>

Syllables are the units on which 'measure' is based,<sup>225</sup> and perhaps it was a step back to that elemental and minimal level that made the poem 'A Piece' (*Words*; SP 118) such an important one. This was a poem that represented a new manner of composition for Creeley, one that was immediate and not governed by 'some final code of significance' (CP 42). His comment suggests a sort of writing that was 'automatic or inspirational'. 'A Piece', Minimalist in scale, mimics a musician's count at the beginning of a song:

One and  
one, two,  
three.

Despite the poem's extreme Minimalism, its formal reduction to a mere three lines (of at most two syllables) and four monosyllabic words, Creeley has said that 'for me it was central to all possibilities of statement' (CP 42). According to Robert Grenier, Creeley finally came to grips with the idea of organicism of form with 'A Piece',<sup>226</sup> and certainly one must suspect that the title of Creeley's subsequent collection, *Pieces*, had its origins in this poem.

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<sup>224</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse'. *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (University of California Press, 1997), pp. 241-242.

<sup>225</sup> Creeley does at times break words into syllables, but it is more characteristic of him to use words of one or two syllables as units in themselves.

<sup>226</sup> Grenier, 'A Packet for Robert Creeley', *Boundary 2* 6:3 (Spring-Fall 1978) p. 424.

Grenier says that Creeley's 'second period of development' became apparent in *Pieces*, 'where the primary interest is language process/energy released by an intensity of perception given closeup to the elements of language (letters, syllables, words) in the process of their self-formation'.<sup>227</sup> *Pieces* was controversial, but 'even the negative reviews, however, responded to the increasing leanness of Creeley's already taut, spare, minimal style, reflecting his increasing obsession with going beyond things to words and beyond the referents of those words to the words as objects, as pieces'.<sup>228</sup> In *Pieces* Creeley began his exploration of poetry as an open process rather than a closed or finished product. *Pieces*, dedicated to Louis Zukofsky, is structured similarly to Zukofsky's 'I's (pronounced *eyes*)'. *Pieces* has a table of contents that clearly identifies individual poems as such, and within the book itself some titles do plainly appear, but the layout makes it difficult at times to determine where one poem ends and another begins. For instance, there are five blocks of text on page 7 separated by equivalent amounts of white space and by dots. In the middle the lines

Sitting, waves on the beach,  
or else clouds, in the sky,  
  
a road, going by,  
cars, a truck, animals, in crowds.

are followed by

The car  
moving  
the hill  
down

Although the line-lengths differ, the mention of cars in both groups of lines make them conceivably part of the same poem. Only the table of contents tells us that the

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 422.

<sup>228</sup> Ford, *Creeley*, p. 40.



line 'The car' is the beginning of another poem. There are also three dots rather than one separating these two groups of lines, and although according to the list of contents three dots demarcates separate poems, in reading practice it is difficult to mark the distinction.<sup>229</sup> The thematic contiguity also shows the way in which these poems record a writing process.

More relevant to my discussion of Minimalism in Creeley, however, is the fact that *parts* of poems are also indistinguishable from actual poems. Some sections of poems are considerably longer than poems such as 'P.S.'

Thinking of Olson—'we are  
As we find out we are.'

Or the untitled poem that reads 'So tired / it falls / apart.' By comparison, lines such as

The day comes and goes,  
the far vistas of the west  
are piles of clouds and  
an impending storm. I see  
it all now—nothing more.

sound complete, like a poem in themselves, though they only form a section. By presenting his poems in this way, Creeley encourages intensive focus on the groups of lines themselves, and on their relationships with each other in the book as a whole, and the 'poem' as a cohesive unit is de-emphasised. It is the 'pieces', the small bits, that Creeley demands we see in this book.

In his reading of *Pieces* and *A Day Book*, Jed Rasula finds 'that morality is nothing other than the ability to discriminate accurately between the pieces'.<sup>230</sup> He links this notion to the idea of place that is prominent in Creeley, particularly in the recurrent 'here'. In that word is to be found the insistence on 'the local' that Creeley

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<sup>229</sup> Jed Rasula sees the dots, whether one or three, as 'thoroughly disruptive', but I find them easy to overlook. Rasula, 'Placing Pieces', *Sagetrieb* 1:3 (1982), p. 165.

<sup>230</sup> 'Placing Pieces', pp. 165-166.

associates with Williams, and the focus on the domestic and mundane. If there is a view of morality implicit in this narrowing of scope, in reducing the subject matter to that which is present in the immediate context of composition, it is one that finds by such Minimalist reduction of material the limits of the personal and the mundane.

In *Pieces*,<sup>231</sup> Creeley wrote, ‘Want to get the sense of “I” into Zukofsky’s “eye”—a locus of experience, not a presumption of expected value’ (68). Creeley is seeking to ground poetry in the personal, seeking to find significance in what is seen by relating it to the self rather than finding value merely in the abstract act of registering data with the senses. But the issue for Creeley is that the very nature of language makes getting ‘the sense of “I”’ into poetry difficult. When the personal and quotidian are rendered in Minimalist fashion, they appear abstract and universal. A poem such as

Here is  
where there  
is (194)

highlights the relative nature of such demonstrative pronouns, their dependence upon one another for their meaning, and also the fact that what we think of as ‘there’, as other, may be for someone else a ‘here’, that which is familiar. Minimalist practice allows Creeley to address this central issue of the relation between the self and the abstract system of language.

I have insisted on the importance of Creeley to late twentieth-century American poetry, and I now want to discuss the work of two poets who were profoundly influenced by Creeley’s reductive practices, but who developed their own, distinctive styles of Minimalism and thus carry the tradition established in Imagism,

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<sup>231</sup> Creeley, *Pieces* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969). Subsequent references will appear in the text.

Objectivism and Williams through the end of the twentieth century and into the digital age.

*Aram Saroyan*

In his 1997 survey of Minimalist poetry, Bob Grumman designates the work of Aram Saroyan as of historical importance to the form. In Grumman's opinion, 'full-scale minimalist poetry didn't begin in this country [the U.S.] and Canada until the one-word poems of Aram Saroyan and Richard Kostelanetz in the late sixties and early seventies'.<sup>232</sup> Kostelanetz has persisted in his Minimalism, but Saroyan's work in the mode was short-lived. In fact, Saroyan himself reports that as early as autumn 1967, he had 'carried [his] minimalist aesthetic as far as [he] could', and by the time he started writing seriously again, in 1972, 'it wasn't minimal poetry anymore'.<sup>233</sup> Nevertheless Saroyan explicitly applies the term 'Minimalist' to his work in the sixties, and it clearly exemplifies Minimalist practice. He has specifically identified his work with Minimalist visual art. When he met his future wife, he was struck by the fact that she shared his liking for 'minimal-conceptual' art and the work of Donald Judd.<sup>234</sup> Saroyan's one-word poems are, he believes, 'an equivalent in language' to Judd's work.<sup>235</sup> Like Judd, who wanted his sculpture to be seen 'all at once', Saroyan valued immediacy in poetry.<sup>236</sup> Saroyan's Minimalist poetry was so extensively published as Concrete that he has earned a place in the second tier of most-published Concrete poets.<sup>237</sup> With the reinvention of Concrete poetry in new, digital work, and the publication of Saroyan's writing online, his work is newly visible and perhaps

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<sup>232</sup> Grumman, 'Minimalist Poetry'.

<sup>233</sup> Aram Saroyan, *Friends in the World: The Education of a Writer* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1992), p. 51.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>236</sup> Telephone interview with Saroyan, 15 July 2004.

<sup>237</sup> Kathleen McCullough, 'Introduction', *Concrete Poetry: An Annotated International Bibliography, with an Index of Poets and Poems* (Troy, New York: Whitston, 1989), p. xiii.

influential. Saroyan's Minimalist work also includes a foray into the novel, illustrating the radical possibilities of Minimalism in fiction.

Saroyan has explicitly designated himself one of Creeley's poetic heirs. He was inspired to start his own literary magazine at age twenty, after making a pilgrimage to visit Creeley in Placitas, New Mexico. He describes himself upon his return as 'fresh from Creeley's transmission of a poetic tradition'.<sup>238</sup> *Lines* appeared in 1964 and 1965, with a total of six issues. According to Clay and Phillips in their book on little magazines from 1960-1980,

the look of mimeo was perfect for Saroyan and for *Lines*, which published the community of poets whom he admired, in their more 'abstract' or minimalist moments. The strikingly simple covers and the carefully composed pages make *Lines* among the most elegant of all the 1960s mimeograph magazines.<sup>239</sup>

*Lines* was a venue in which Saroyan could establish his place in the tradition by publishing his own work alongside that of those he admired, including poems of homage to certain poets.

Saroyan clearly places Zukofsky in an eminent position. The epigraph to the first issue of *Lines* is Zukofsky's 'Poem 21', written in 1942:

Can a mote of sunlight defeat its purpose  
When thought shows it to be deep or dark?

See sun, and think shadow.

A Saroyan poem from the May 1965 issue is titled 'Louis', and reads (in its entirety):

Noisy  
'Zukofsky',<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> *Friends in the World*, p. 24.

<sup>239</sup> Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980* (New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation and Granary Books, 1998), p. 211. Saroyan notes that Clay and Phillips are mistaken in referring to *Lines* as a mimeograph magazine. Instead 'it was photo-offset, which accounts for the clean look of it'. E-mail correspondence with author, 4 August 2004.

<sup>240</sup> Saroyan, *Lines* 5 (May 1965), p. 4.

If Zukofsky's first name is pronounced 'Lou-ee', then the title rhymes with the two lines of the poem. The brevity of the piece highlights the assonance between the first syllables of the names 'Louis' and 'Zukofsky'. Sound is thematically foregrounded as well, by the word 'Noisy'.

The emphasis on sound that Saroyan seems to associate with Zukofsky is part of the poetic tradition transmitted from Creeley. Saroyan recalls that on his visit to Creeley in New Mexico, 'As I was showing him some of my recent poems, he said something about "hearing" one line with another a dozen or so lines later in the poem. That flipped a switch—I thought I finally understood what I needed to understand about making a poem'.<sup>241</sup> In other words, Creeley taught Saroyan to conceive of poetry as essentially patterns of sound. 'Creeley said, in effect, poetry is noises that go together'. This was the tradition of Black Mountain poetry in particular and free verse in general into which Creeley initiated Saroyan, and the young poet soon learned that he could achieve the sort of sound patterning essential to poetry with only a few elements.<sup>242</sup>

A poem called 'Placitas'<sup>243</sup> reflects Saroyan's view of both Creeley and Zukofsky as poetic predecessors who placed a premium on sound. Placitas is the name of the town in New Mexico where Saroyan met Creeley. But 'Placitas' is dedicated 'to L.Z.'—Zukofsky, no doubt—and the piece echoes 'Louis' in its inclusion of 'noise' and in its close patterning of sound.

The trees'  
noise of  
the sea.

This poem may allude to Zukofsky's 'Tree—See?', a section of 'I's (pronounced eyes)', which it also resembles visually:

<sup>241</sup> *Friends in the World*, p. 23.

<sup>242</sup> Telephone interview with Saroyan, 15 July 2004.

<sup>243</sup> Saroyan, *Lines 2* (December 1964), p. 23.

--I see  
       by  
       your tree

--What  
       do you  
       see<sup>244</sup>

'Placitas' was published in the second issue of *Lines*, in December 1964.<sup>245</sup>

None of Zukofsky's own poems appear in the issue, but it was dedicated 'to L.Z.', and the 'Contributors' notes inside the back cover end with the following:

If you don't know who LOUIS ZUKOFSKY is what the hell's the matter with you. His collected shorter poems expected from Norton, and A Test of Poetry in October from Totem/Corinth.

The older poets Saroyan selected for *Lines* included the Objectivists. They are represented in part by Lorine Niedecker, whose 'Lights, lifts' (discussed in the previous chapter) and another poem were printed in Issue 5 (May 1965).<sup>246</sup> Some of the other artists Saroyan included in his magazine were Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer, Ron Padgett, Robert Grenier, and Clark Coolidge. Coolidge later experimented with Minimalist forms, perhaps as the result of encouragement from Saroyan.<sup>247</sup>

A number of Saroyan's poems are extremely brief descriptions of things heard. As such they focus, like so much of Creeley's work, on the immediate context of composition, and so exhibit Minimalism of material. A salient aspect in these Saroyan poems is the recording of a sonic event. These are the aural equivalent of Charles Reznikoff's miniature visual snapshot poems—a 'poetry of the ear' to

<sup>244</sup> Zukofsky, *Complete Shorter Poetry*, p. 216.

<sup>245</sup> Zukofsky apparently enjoyed some fame in New York at about this time. According to Libbie Rifkin, 'for a brief moment, he was simultaneously a respected elder and something of a novelty in poetry circles', and his home replaced Williams's a Mecca for young poets after Williams's death in 1963. He had begun to appear regularly in *Kulchur* by 1962. Rifkin quotes Ted Berrigan as saying that 'in the early sixties in New York, the young guys had Louis Zukofsky jammed down their throats'. *Career Moves*, p. 74.

<sup>246</sup> Lorine Niedecker, in *Lines* 5 (May 1965), pp. 32-33. See the previous chapter for a brief discussion of this poem.

<sup>247</sup> Saroyan, *Friends in the World*, p. 46.

Reznikoff's 'poetry of the eye'.<sup>248</sup> The poems, like Reznikoff's, have an objective focus. Ego and subjectivity are effaced, and the poet becomes a recording instrument. Saroyan's grouping of these poems suggest that place is important to their composition. 'Sled Hill Voices', composed in Woodstock, New York in 1965, includes the following:

near &  
far birds

a fly very  
close<sup>249</sup>

There is no intrusion here of the poet onto the material; he functions merely as the ear in relation to which the things named can be placed. The layout of the words on the page seems designed to give a visual sense of 'near & / far' and 'very / close'. Identifying the location of the sounds in another poem, 'whistling in the street a car turning in the room ticking',<sup>250</sup> demarcates an aural space.

Although spatially 'whistling' extends to the world outside, spreading out into the street, it is temporally restricted. Temporal location in a single moment is typical of Saroyan's 'poems of the ear'. A poem from 'Third Floor Voices', written in New York City in Fall 1965, records the aural events of an instant:

somebody as

suddenly as a radio comes on  
in the street

speaks<sup>251</sup>

Saroyan's careful attention to the sound of the words in his poems is evident here as well. Sibilants dominate in somebody, as, suddenly, as (again), comes, street, speaks:

<sup>248</sup> Paul Auster 'The Decisive Moment', p. 151.

<sup>249</sup> Saroyan, *Sled Hill Voices: 13 Poems* (London: Goliard, 1966), n.p.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Saroyan, *The Rest* (Telegraph, 1971), p. 23.



appearing in more than half the total words in the poem, or eight times in twelve words. There is also assonance or vowel rhyme in 'street // speaks'.

Particular sounds are placed in relation to one another in some of these works. Does someone speak 'in the street' or does the radio come on 'in the street', or is the street the location of both sonic events? It is not clear whether they happen to be the only sounds in the air at the time, and it seems unlikely in the case of those poems written in the city. Their selection from among the various sounds available constitutes a reductive act, and the number of words used to describe them is kept to a minimum. In 'whistling' the words 'in the street' serve as a 'hinge', performing double duty to identify the location of both the whistling and the car. The hinge device thus reinforces the simultaneity of the aural events, and the lack of even a comma (or a line break) separating the elements forces reading in a rush, the words coming right up against one another, following as quickly as possible. The hinge also allows the poets to use fewer words than might be otherwise and thus facilitates the poem's Minimalism.

At least two words are cut from what would be a grammatically complete version of 'the radiator, the radio louder'.<sup>252</sup> Doing away with 'is' and 'than' and reversing the position of the phrases emphasises by their proximity the repetition of the first three syllables of each phrase, as well as their similar ending. There *is* poetic fashioning, even in a poem so brief, in addition to the objective statement of aural fact. The following poem similarly makes elegant use of one of Saroyan's favourite poetic subjects, crickets:

Not a  
cricket  
  
ticks a

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<sup>252</sup> *Pages* (New York: Random House, 1969), n.p.

clock<sup>253</sup>

This poem may be 'longer' than some of those discussed above, in that it seems to describe two moments. It also allows more intrusion of the poet's experience, though restricted to the misrecognition of one sound for another. But this is merely suggested by the statement of the fact that the 'ticking' comes from a timepiece rather than an insect. The first three vowel sounds of the first stanza here—'o', 'a', 'i'—are inverted in the second. Doubt as to the origin of the sound is expressed in the first stanza, and, after a pause, the source is identified, turning the poem from confusion to certainty. The final 't' of the first stanza is mirrored in the first letter of the second, and 'ticks' is close enough to the 'crick' of 'cricket' for it to seem that the words themselves and not just the final letters reflect one another. 'Clock' combines the vowel sound of 'not' with the consonants 'ck' of 'cricket' and 'ticks'.

Fellow Minimalist Robert Lax contributed a poem to the final issue of Saroyan's *Lines*. His work may appear there because of his sometime association with Concrete poetry. Concrete and Visual poetry do have a strong presence in the pages of *Lines*, and are related to another facet of Saroyan's Minimalist experiment. A number of pages at the beginning of issue 4 were devoted to the Scottish Concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay. Saroyan pays tribute to Finlay in the following poem, which emphasises an aspect of the written name of the poet:

ian hamilton finlay<sup>254</sup>

The Visual/Concrete element is especially prominent in Issue 6, which features work by bp Nichol, Dom Sylvester Houédard, and John Furnival.<sup>255</sup> This sort of work

<sup>253</sup> Saroyan, *Pages*, n.p.

<sup>254</sup> Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), n.p.

<sup>255</sup> One of the Furnival pieces in this issue is 'The Fall of the Tower of Babel' (1964). This piece has added resonance after the events of autumn 2001: its tall, vertical column of a tower collapses from the

represents another tradition, in which poetry is essentially words in their written or visual form.<sup>256</sup>

In addition to the tribute to Finlay, other Saroyan poems in *Lines* show him working with a Minimalist conception of poetry as visual. The lowercase letters t, i, n, and y look truly tiny when spread out on a page, bouncing, in sparse order, from left to right and top to bottom. The page number is even omitted from the bottom of the page so as not to interfere with the appearance of the poem on it.<sup>257</sup> 'School' represents that social unit of aquatic creatues:

fffisffish  
ffifisfish  
ffisfish<sup>258</sup>

Paul Carroll chose for his 1968 anthology *The Young American Poets* six Saroyan poems, with a total of ten words among them (one of these words is repeated once, another multiple times).<sup>259</sup> Concrete anthologists Emmett Williams, Eugene Wildman, and Mary Ellen Solt also found room for Minimalist pieces by Saroyan. Saroyan's place in these books indicates the importance of the visual element of his work. Solt published two versions of one of the 'Crickets' poems, one in Saroyan's original typescript, and another designed by a typographical artist, in order to raise the question of how the difference in presentation affects the poem. Her decision was prompted by Saroyan's remark that the typewriter on which he composes his work has a major impact on the poems themselves.<sup>260</sup> In the other three Saroyan poems Solt

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top in a manner reminiscent of the fall of the World Trade Center towers. The words most prominently visible are 'Peace for the World'.

<sup>256</sup> This tradition was not entirely separate from the other one. Saroyan says that Creeley introduced him to the work of Finlay, and Williams, of course, was experimenting with typography twenty years before Saroyan's birth.

<sup>257</sup> In *Lines* 5 (May 1965), p. 6.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>259</sup> Saroyan, 'oxygen', 'wire air', 'crickets', 'table / ambulance', 'silence', 'cat / book / city', in Paul Carroll, ed., *The Young American Poets: A Big Table Book* (Chicago: Follett, 1968), pp. 364-369.

<sup>260</sup> The poems are on pp. 236 and 237 of Mary Ellen Solt, ed., *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Indiana University Press, 1970). Saroyan's remark and Solt's discussion of it are on pp. 57 and 58 of the same

published, the grainy, irregular appearance of the letters highlights their materiality, their status as shapes made of ink on the surface of the page. This concern with the materiality of written language reaches its ultimate Minimalist potential in the poem that consists solely of a chunky letter 'm' with an extra hump and leg that I reproduced at the very beginning of this thesis. It perfectly illustrates Guy Bennett's concept of visual poetry, which, 'at its most minimal, [...] has as both its point of departure and final destination the letter shape'.<sup>261</sup>

For Bennett, visual poetry in this sense 'obviat[es] any linguistic context in which it might signify something [...] thus radically reducing, if not altogether eliminating the possibility of conventional linear reading, that is—ultimately—reading for meaning'.<sup>262</sup> In discussions of his aesthetic principles Saroyan similarly expresses a desire to escape from the tyranny of reading in favour of a poetics that emphasises the word as object. In a letter to Mary Ellen Solt, he writes, 'No more reading! If you have to read, resolve any structure of language into a meaning, well that's just it—it resolves! The words disappear into a meaning'.<sup>263</sup> 'New poetry', he says, 'isn't going to be poetry for reading. It's going to be for looking at, that is if it's poetry to be printed and not taped'.<sup>264</sup> Creeley used line breaks to force consideration of words in isolation, apart from their function within the phrase or sentence whose meaning forms a whole. Saroyan also disrupts the reading process, but by different means. In his practice, the aim is to draw attention to those aspects of literary

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book. Saroyan's poem 'The Collected Works' (*Lines* 5, p. 11) consists of eight lines in four pairs. Each pair represents a line of keys on the typewriter, the first showing the symbols obtained when using the shift key, the second when typed directly.

<sup>261</sup> Guy Bennett, 'Concerning the Visual in Poetry', *Witz* 7.1 (1999),

[http://litpress.com/witz/witz\\_71.pdf](http://litpress.com/witz/witz_71.pdf).

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Saroyan, as quoted by Solt, 'A World Look at Concrete Poetry', Solt, ed. *Concrete Poetry*, p. 58.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

language that appeal directly to the senses, without mediation, their visual or aural qualities.

Saroyan elaborates on his ideas about the immediacy of poetry in defence of a poem that has been called 'the most expensive word in history'<sup>265</sup>:

lighght<sup>266</sup>

Much to Saroyan's dismay, this poem became notorious by figuring in a political battle over funding for the arts in the U.S. In 1970 it was denounced in Congress 'as a misuse of public money at the rate of \$107 per letter'.<sup>267</sup> Saroyan had not read Marshall McLuhan when he wrote the poem, but he explained it in terms of McLuhan's theory of 'the electric-television era of communication'.<sup>268</sup> An important feature of the poem in this regard is that it is 'instant'. (The repeated letters contribute to the poem's being 'simultaneous' and 'multiple' as well.) Because of its extreme brevity, it does not require reading and can be taken in at a glance. Its appeal is immediate.

Saroyan explains the poem as the product of his generation's exposure 'to a number of variations on the phenomenon of light'.<sup>269</sup> Bob Grumman says that

The extra 'gh' is neither trivial nor obscure. By putting it into his word, Saroyan brings us face-to-face with the ineffability of light, a mysterious substance whose components are somehow there but absent, as 'ghgh' is there (and delicately shimmering) but unpronounced in the word, 'lighght'. And he leaves us with intimations

<sup>265</sup> Saroyan, *Friends in the World*, p. 80.

<sup>266</sup> The poem appears in *Aram Saroyan* (New York: Random House, 1968), n.p., and in Eugene Wildman, ed., *Anthology of Concretism* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1969), p. 25. In 'Flower Power' (1999, [http://www.ubu.com/papers/saroyan\\_flower.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/saroyan_flower.html)), Saroyan notes that the book 'has been retyped' and that the poem is now misspelled 'lightght'. It appears in that incorrect form in the version of *Aram Saroyan* at *Ubu Web* ([www.ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com)).

<sup>267</sup> *Friends in the World*, p. 83. Saroyan says that the poem was used by Ronald Reagan to justify drastic cuts in the National Endowment for the Arts budget (p. 85). According to Bob Grumman ('Minimalist Poetry'), who claims it as not only his favourite Minimalist poem, but his favourite poem overall, 'lighght' continues to be denounced from time to time.

<sup>268</sup> *Friends in the World*, p. 82.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

of his single syllable of light's expanding, silently and weightlessly,  
'gh' by 'gh', into ... Final Illumination.<sup>270</sup>

The 'gh' lengthens the word in its ordinary spelling, both in terms of its number of letters and in its effect upon the pronunciation: without it the word is 'lit', and the vowel is short. With the additional 'gh' it is longer again, suggesting the airy expansion Grumman finds in it.

Repetition is common in Saroyan, and can vary in effect depending on the word used and the addition of a small space.

coffee  
coffee<sup>271</sup>

hints at caffeine-induced enthusiasm and rapidity of speech. But in

silence  
silence<sup>272</sup>

the implied pause of the space, combined with the subject named, imparts the gravity of a serious request for the cessation of noise. In

o        r  
o        r<sup>273</sup>

the two possibilities in the disjunction named and illustrated are emphasised by the repetition. Repetition was also, of course, a favourite device of Modernists such as Stein, and it is also feature of Minimalist visual art. One version of Saroyan's 'Crickets' poems consists of the word 'crickets' repeated numerous times in a column near the right-hand margin of the page, and running off the top and bottom. It is visually similar to Judd's 'stack' sculptures, which consist of identically sized

<sup>270</sup> Grumman, 'Minimalist Poetry'.

<sup>271</sup> Aram Saroyan.

<sup>272</sup> In Carroll, ed., *The Young American Poets*, p. 368.

<sup>273</sup> Aram Saroyan.

rectangular boxes placed in regular intervals above one another on a wall.<sup>274</sup> It also functions as a sound poem, and conveys the insects' incessant presence in the summer night, a noise just off to the side.<sup>275</sup>

My first encounter with Saroyan's foray into Minimalist fiction was accidental. Not noticing that I was in the 'Historical' section of the *UbuWeb*, I found and read *Cloth: An Electric Novel*.<sup>276</sup> The format in which it is presented there suits the novel so well that at first I thought it had been composed *as* an electronic work. I was mistaken: *Cloth* was brought out in print by Big Table in Chicago in 1971. But the word 'click' on one page serendipitously matches the updated format, since one performs the action named to continue reading the book. Each page has only one word (in a rounded, sans serif font) so that when one wishes to go on to the next page in the electronic version, one clicks on that word and the next one appears in its place. The 'electric-television era of communication'<sup>277</sup> has morphed into the electronic-digital-computer era of communication and art. Concrete poetry has found new life on the World Wide Web, and *Cloth* has been reborn there too.

The back cover of the print version contains the following poem-like description:

*Cloth* is a novel.

*Cloth* is a novel  
that asks the question:  
what is a novel?

*Cloth* is a novel

<sup>274</sup> Saroyan says that the poem was inspired by Abstract Expressionist 'Barnett Newman's paintings with the single column to the right of center'. Email correspondence with author, 4 August 2004.

<sup>275</sup> Wildman, ed., *Anthology of Concretism*, p. 27. Saroyan says that 'aurally it's the work of mine that's had the most impact as a sound poem. The word crickets repeated slowly was one I used to read regularly back then--and the readings were reproduced on several recordings including one by Charles Amirkhanian, recently re-released as a CD (it was first done as an LP in the early seventies) called 12 + 2: American Sound Texts. If you repeat the word slowly you'll see that in fact it does evoke the sound of crickets'. Email correspondence with author, 4 August 2004.

<sup>276</sup> Saroyan, *Cloth: An Electric Novel*, [http://www.ubu.com/historical\\_frames.html](http://www.ubu.com/historical_frames.html).

<sup>277</sup> Saroyan, discussing McLuhan, in *Friends in the World*, p. 82.

without sentences, plot  
or characters.

[...]

*Cloth* is a novel  
that helps to define  
where experimental writing is.

*Cloth* is a novel  
that quite possibly will turn out  
to be an important book.<sup>278</sup>

It may not have sentences, plot, or characters, but *Cloth* does have chapters, or at least sections—four of them. It is Minimalist in form in that it fulfils at least one formal expectation of the novel, that it will have chapters. Its Minimalism of unit resides in the fact that each of these chapters contains so few words, and each page contains only one word. The first four pages are ‘cloth’ ‘hole’ ‘animal’, and ‘gate’. The book does not consist entirely of such relatively concrete nouns, however. There are verbs, adjectives, articles, prepositions, proper nouns, and pronouns. But although these provide all the necessary ingredients for grammatically complete sentences, as the blurb on the cover says, there are none. One does catch glimpses of a narrative as certain words build on previous ones to suggest familiar patterns of events. In chapter I, words like ‘Saturday’, ‘out’, ‘green’, ‘hostess’ (though they do not follow immediately upon one another) convey a festive atmosphere. The possibility of a romance can be found in ‘you’, ‘hunch’, ‘perfect’, ‘new’, and this idea is furthered with ‘magnet’, ‘bullet’, ‘pull’ (at least in a British context), and ‘movies’. The happy couple become engaged, set up house together, and receive good wishes: ‘diamond’, ‘live’, and ‘oh’, ‘congratulates’.

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<sup>278</sup> Saroyan, *Cloth: An Electric Novel* (Chicago: Big Table, 1971). In Chapter 6 I will discuss David Markson’s novels without plot or characters.



*Cloth* ends with 'says', that is to say, with no closure. Interpretative closure is likewise not possible, despite the fact that there is a minimum of material. The storyline I have delineated may or may not have been intended, and it is certainly not the only one to be found in the novel. Many scenarios are evoked, such as a childish romp in the countryside at the opening of the book, a 'nine'-year-old's encounter with an 'animal' spurring a hasty retreat through a 'gate' and resulting in a 'hole' in the 'cloth' of a garment. Or the buzz of the counterculture in 'puff', 'shake', 'ear', 'ear', 'ear', 'the', 'mix', 'California'. 'Much', 'have', 'write' come together near the end of the book: an author has had a productive day, either in accomplishment or in inspiration.

The openness of this book to multiple interpretations is in keeping with the principles Saroyan espouses. Nevertheless, to call it a novel is to place it within a narrative tradition, and to arouse expectations that certain conventions will be followed. Saroyan says that with longer poems, there is 'a reading process and that would involve *time*—a beginning, a middle, and an end—which, however contracted, would be patently uncharacteristic of electric structure'.<sup>279</sup> This comment suggests that a narrative form such as the novel is itself 'uncharacteristic of electric structure', and thus unsuitable for children of the 'electric-television era of communication'. Saroyan's experiment with *Cloth* is an attempt to refashion the novel for the 1960s generation and those who follow.

Is it true that '*Cloth* is a novel that quite possibly will turn out to be an important book'? Miekal And wrote in 1994 that

A novel of sentences  
with one word each  
has given way to  
another monolith

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<sup>279</sup> *Friends in the World*, p. 82.

of speech.<sup>280</sup>

These lines suggest the dominance of the gargantuan novel, with its myriad voices adding up to a wall of cacophony, over Minimalist experiments such as *Cloth*. It also implies that 'speech' has taken precedence over writing or the immediate, visual impact of one-word structures such as Saroyan's poems or the pages of *Cloth*. But electronic literature has flourished since And's poem. Perhaps *Cloth* will achieve importance as a model for fictional experiment, but it seems likely that it will be as an electronic text, and not as a book.

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<sup>280</sup> Mickal And, 'Hike Cue', *Rift* 3.1 (1994), <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/rift/rift03/rift0301.html#and>.

*Robert Grenier*

In 1971, Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten founded *This* magazine, one of the first venues for the publication of what would become known as Language Poetry.

Grenier's proclamation 'I HATE SPEECH'<sup>281</sup> in the first issue is frequently cited as an originary moment for Language poetry, signalling a break with the speech-based poetics of Projectivism, and emphasizing the written over the spoken. Yet Grenier's statement should not be read as advocating a disembodied poetics. His poetry of the 1970s and 1980s displays a concern with the domestic and with place, indicating situatedness in a particular place and time, akin to that of Creeley and Saroyan, and in part inspired by process-oriented poetry such as Creeley's *Pieces*.

Grenier's most recent work is handwritten, or perhaps it is more appropriately called 'drawn'. His idiosyncratic way of writing is essential to it, giving evidence of the artist's hand in a way that printed work does not. The poetry is thus intimately connected with the poet's body, and in this sense the break with the Olson tradition seems less emphatic.<sup>282</sup> Olson emphasises the breath, and cites body parts such as the head, the ear, and the heart in his account of poetry.<sup>283</sup> Grenier's drawing poems are as idiosyncratic to him as a signature, and record the work of the poet's hand as it propels the pen across the page.

Grenier's work exhibits inherent ambiguities about the personal and the abstract also present in Creeley and Saroyan. These are often the result of his Minimalist practice. Grenier's earlier (1970s and 1980s) Minimalism can be

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<sup>281</sup> Grenier, 'On Speech', *This* 1 (Winter 1971), n.p.

<sup>282</sup> With regard to Grenier's famous declaration in 'On Speech', Ron Silliman points out 'as his essay was careful to make clear, Grenier's declaration was not to be taken at face value'. Yet most citations of 'I HATE SPEECH' seem to do just that. Silliman, 'Language, Realism, Poetry', *In the American Tree* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), p. xv.

<sup>283</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', pp. 239-249.

considered as in the same tradition of some of Creeley's and Saroyan's work, and he has been influenced by some of the same writers, including Williams and Zukofsky. Although I will focus on these more recent predecessors, Grenier traces his poetic lineage further back, and insists that his work be seen as arising out of the specific context of an American poetic tradition that includes Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson.<sup>284</sup>

Grenier's later work is unique, but remains Minimalist.<sup>285</sup> Although his statement 'I HATE SPEECH' is quoted quite often, Grenier's poetry is largely neglected by scholars, and printed copies of it are difficult to obtain. But the recent publication of *Sentences* on the Internet, and the presence of some of his 1990s 'scrawl poems' in the online *Light and Dust Anthology* have made him available to a much larger audience. Grenier's name is already familiar because of his connection with the beginnings of Language Poetry, and he will no doubt receive more serious attention as his work becomes more widely read.

Saroyan published Grenier in *Lines* in 1964, and in turn Grenier published Saroyan in *This*, the magazine he founded with Barrett Watten in 1971. The second issue includes nine Saroyan poems, with a total of 21 lines between them, and an essay immediately following the last group of five called 'For Aram Saroyan, Who Tells the Truth'. There Grenier writes:

These are, basically, exstatic [*sic*] poems. I think everybody knows it. We are 'dealing' with a kind of warm visionary vision, albeit once again, the messenger. Stop it. Sort out, for god's sake, everything you don't say and see what you do:

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<sup>284</sup> Telephone interview with the author, 10 June 2004.

<sup>285</sup> When I asked Grenier how he felt about the term 'Minimalist' as applied to his work, he replied that he didn't like labels for anything (Telephone interview, 26 May 2004). His position on such things is made clear in the opening of his essay 'Nature Poetry': "Nature poetry" is boring—any "kind" of anything is boring—because anything that can be sufficiently identified as "something" to be categorized & ramified in with everything else as "that thing" (as, Nature Poetry) is not only Xed-out as whatever it might be in itself, but reduced to (illustrative) RUBBISH as Example of "itself". 'Nature Poetry', *ecopoetics* 1 (Winter 2001), p. 48.

‘a dish  
of Irish  
setters’

which knows it’s there. He is noting, friendly & funny, at the same time, language with the power to/this much, revealed.<sup>286</sup>

It is not entirely clear to whom the imperatives in Grenier’s remarks are addressed, but they can be read as supporting Saroyan in his insistence on poetic immediacy. The exhortation to ‘see what you do’ say seems a call to focus on what is actually ‘there’, the words and letters on the page. This suggests that Grenier finds value in Saroyan’s reductive techniques and his intense focus on a few particulars, which give a power to the language, makes it present (it ‘knows it’s there’). On the other hand, Grenier’s somewhat cryptic comments could be read as criticising and praising Saroyan at the same time. The mention of ‘exstatic’ poems and the command ‘Stop it’ could indicate that Grenier disapproves of a disembodied quality he finds in Saroyan’s writing.<sup>287</sup>

Looking back on the history of Language Writing in 1984, Ron Silliman mentions Saroyan’s Lines Editions Press and ‘some of the “word salad” compositions in Clark Coolidge’s *Space* dat[ing] from 1965’ as important precedents. Silliman goes on to say that

it was the particular contribution of *This*, in rejecting a speech-based poetics and consciously raising the issue of reference,<sup>288</sup> to suggest that any new direction would require poets to look (in some ways for the first time) at what a poem is actually made of—not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or in one’s mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> *This* 2 (1971), n.p.

<sup>287</sup> Saroyan glosses ‘exstatic’ as meaning ‘not static’ (Telephone interview, 15 July 2004). My reading depends on the sense of ‘ecstatic’ as meaning out of one’s head, in a mystical state of ‘poetic frenzy or rapture’ or ‘beside oneself’, therefore focusing on the message—‘everything you don’t say’—that which is outside the language rather than immediately present in it. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition.

<sup>288</sup> Particularly by the choice of title, ‘a pronoun of presence which foregrounds the referential dimension of language’ (xv).

<sup>289</sup> Silliman, ‘Language, Realism, Poetry’, p. xvi.

Apparently, this is just what Grenier sees in the Saroyan poem quoted above: it draws attention to what *is* said, to the language itself, and ‘knows it’s there’. It is worth noting, too, the relevant connections between Saroyan and Coolidge.

Saroyan published individual poems by Coolidge in *Lines*, and his first collection of poetry, *Flag Flutter and U.S. Electric*, with Lines Press. The two were housemates in 1966 or 67, and Saroyan’s 1966 book *Works* is dedicated to Coolidge.<sup>290</sup> Coolidge’s poems in *Lines* do not exhibit Minimalist tendencies,<sup>291</sup> and both men have mentioned the fact that they disagreed on the subject. Saroyan says that he wanted Coolidge ‘to be more minimal’.<sup>292</sup> Coolidge objected to poems consisting of only one word, as do many of Saroyan’s. Coolidge has said: ‘In 1966, when I was living in Cambridge in the same house with Aram Saroyan, and he was writing those one-word poems, dividing everything down to the smallest possible thing, [...] I immediately wanted to put them together. I couldn’t stand the idea of one word. I don’t think there *is* one word’.<sup>293</sup> But Saroyan must have had some effect, for Coolidge did produce Minimalist work in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s.

Coolidge’s *Suite V* contains a total of forty-two words, of four letters each. The words are arranged in pairs on the page, one at the top margin, and the other at the bottom. If Coolidge felt compelled to put words together, he has done so minimally, by combining only two at a time. The repetition of the ‘s’ ending contributes to the sonic quality one notices when reading the book. Certainly there seems to be no particular logic to the pairings, which include ‘taps’ and ‘buns’, ‘keys’ and ‘ohms’, ‘hats’ and ‘gars’, ‘webs’ and ‘cups’, and ‘airs’ and ‘ores’. At times

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<sup>290</sup> Saroyan says it was 1967 in *Friends in the World*, pp. 45-47. Coolidge dates the time they lived together as 1966. ‘Arrangement’, *Talking Poetics from Naropa Institute* (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1978), p. 161.

<sup>291</sup> See Coolidge, ‘The Death of Floyd Collins’ and ‘Everly Formation’, *Lines* 5 (May 1965), pp. 19 and 26, and ‘Flag Flutter & U.S. Electric’, *Lines* 6 (November 1965), p. 11.

<sup>292</sup> Saroyan, *Friends in the World*, p. 46.

<sup>293</sup> Coolidge, ‘Arrangement’, p. 161.

expectations are thwarted, as when a double-take is required to realise that 'lips' is not followed by 'eyes', as one might assume when reading too quickly, but by 'eves'.<sup>294</sup>

Coolidge's work has drifted away from these Minimalist experiments. But the Minimalist phase in his poetic development may have been spurred by Saroyan's urgings and inclinations.

In 1975 Grenier wrote about Coolidge and Zukofsky, obviously an important figure for Creeley, and one to whom Saroyan dedicated poems in *Lines*.<sup>295</sup> In the essay, 'Notes on Coolidge, Objectives, Zukofsky, Romanticism, and &', a major issue is the idea of words as things. Grenier writes: 'Language process essentially in the world, as a function of common sentient experience in definition of place'.<sup>296</sup> The emphasis on sentient experience and place are, as I have shown, present in Creeley and in Saroyan's poetry of the 1960s. Like Saroyan's 'Sled Hill Voices' and 'Third Floor Voices' of 1965, some of Grenier's poetry is explicitly set in a particular place and time. *Series: Poems 1967-1971* is made up of ten sections, including 'Iowa', 'Great Britain', 'Kansas', 'Crossing Ontario', and 'St. Paul'. The 'Fall Winter Family Home' section contains poems composed in Lanesville, Massachusetts between August 1970 and January 1971 that tend to focus on the domestic or the immediate context of composition. Some are named after and inspired by Grenier's daughter Amy, transcribing her utterances such as

um  
um  
hmmm

<sup>294</sup> Clark Coolidge, *Suite V* (New York: The Poetry Project, St. Marks Church in the Bowery, 1973).

<sup>295</sup> Mark Scroggins calls Grenier 'a dedicated student of Zukofsky's work' ('Z-Sited Path', *World in Time and Space*, p. 153). According to Bob Perelman, Grenier invited Zukofsky to Franconia College for a rare reading of "A"-22 in 1972 ('Here and Now on Paper: The Avant-Garde Particulars of Robert Grenier', *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* [Princeton University Press, 1996], p. 40).

<sup>296</sup> 'Notes on Coolidge, Objectives, Zukofsky, Romanticism, And &', Silliman, ed. *In The American Tree*, p. 531.

*but*

or

I smell  
the smell of  
doggies<sup>297</sup>

To take a few words spoken by a child and make a poem of them is to practice Minimalism of material. Other poems record mundane incidents such as ‘chatting idly inside / green station wagon passing’ (‘HEARSE LICENSE’), in a manner similar to Saroyan’s poems of the ear. In Grenier’s case, however, the sense of hearing does not dominate. For example:

now this  
  
NOW THAT  
  
car  
  
person  
  
turning  
  
lights on

There are plenty of ambiguities resulting from the isolation of words, as in Creeley and Saroyan. Is the car turning, or is a person turning? Is a person turning some lights on, or does the car (or the car that is turning) have its lights on? The poem is remarkably similar to Saroyan’s 1966 ‘whistling in the street a car turning in the room ticking’. One wonders whether Grenier was alluding to the Saroyan poem, or whether he had simply absorbed Saroyan’s poetic influence so completely that the similarity just occurred rather than being consciously created.

Almost all the poems in ‘Fall Winter Family Home’ have capitalised titles clearly demarcating them from one another (unlike other sections of *Series I* will

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<sup>297</sup> *Series: Poems 1967-1971* (This, 1978), is unpaginated.



discuss shortly). But as he does in 'NOW THAT', Grenier plays with the placement of his titles. In this case, the title shows up in the second line of the poem itself. Minimalist poems often press titles into service, making them function as part of the poem rather than as mere names. Grenier takes this Minimalist tendency to the extreme: some of the poems in 'Fall Winter Family Home' consist of nothing more than the title, for example 'DEVOTION', 'THROUGH THE SPACE BETWEEN', 'LIES', 'NOW IT IS', and 'SNOWSTORMS'. These poems are radically Minimalist in form, as well as in scale.

The title-only poems are not the only ones reduced starkly, exhibiting Minimalism of scale, form, and unit. A number of them have only one, two, or three words. One of the best of these, made of a single line with a single word of a single syllable, expresses the sense of being deep in the north in a harsh season:

WINTER

*here*

The adverb of place, so common in Creeley, seems to gain force in connection with the season named in the title, as anyone who reads the poem in the midst of winter will attest. In a similar vein, 'SNOW' 'bodies forth', and to clear it, 'PLOWS' go 'by'. Another poem conveys, in comic fashion, frustration at the licensing bureau. 'DMV' (Department of Motor Vehicles) contains one word, 'VALID', but it is repeated, in italics and with hyphens between the letters: '*V-A-L-I-D*'. Gustatory pleasures are invoked in 'JOY':

maple

apple

Thus mundane facts and sensations are chronicled. The focus remains small, is reduced to local particulars in Minimalist fashion. Just one poem refers to political events—‘NOVEMBER 3rd’ reads ‘*resume bombing*’ but it too does so minimally.

The epigraph to ‘Fall Winter Family Home’ is from William Carlos Williams: ‘threes, threes and threes’. The Williams poem from which it comes, ‘On Gay Wallpaper’ (1928), is made of three-line stanzas, the one in question being

Mat roses and tridentate  
leaves of gold  
threes, threes and threes (*CP 1*, 285)

There seems to be no direct relation of the poem as a whole to Grenier’s series of poems, but the emphasis on numbers alone suggests a latent concern with the abstract that becomes more apparent later in Grenier’s career. Williams’s poem refers to a surface pattern on the wallpaper, which resonates with an interest in the material, surface features of language. On the other hand, perhaps the number three is invoked because it indicates the domestic configuration of man, woman, and child. Reference to such a situation does not necessarily preclude emphasis on the materiality of poetic language for Grenier. As he remarked in reference to Ron Silliman’s work,

Another thing that maintains *Ketjak* for me is the interest in so-called poetic language at the same time that language is operating in very simple practical ways. All these sentences give information as to the specific time and place of composition. Form and content don’t have to be opposed usages. You can have structure that generates its own form at the same time assertions are made about something outside the sign.<sup>298</sup>

Even in those poems that clearly emerge from a domestic incident, the point is often something other than the incident itself. One of the poems called ‘AMY’ reads:

I did this one  
  
she did that one

---

<sup>298</sup> In Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 22-23.

I did that one

I did that one

I did that one

In making a poem out of Amy's utterances, Grenier is dangerously close to affirming the speech-based poetics that he is supposed to have rejected. The importance of the speech element should not be entirely ignored, but it clearly is only part of the picture. Grenier is not simply acting as proud father and preserving for posterity the precious sayings of a doted-upon daughter. Instead, the interest is in the rhythm and repetition of an actual instance of language. In this case, the way in which the words form a pattern is the way in which they *are* in the world, their mode of existence. Grenier displays them like an artist working with found objects, directing our attention to that which we might in ordinary circumstances promptly pass over. They are Minimalist in material and in style.

The role of attention is an important one for Grenier, and it is related to the concept of the closed poem and its opposite, 'open' poetry that emphasises process over product. Grenier associates process-oriented poetry with Creeley, and particularly with *Pieces*. In the inaugural issue of *This* Grenier stated that "'PROJECTIVE VERSE" IS *PIECES* ON'. Bob Perelman interprets Grenier as saying that the 'specific direction for the future of poetry [...] was fully embodied in *Pieces*'.<sup>299</sup> In 1978 Grenier wrote about

That apparently largely neglected & misunderstood second period of Creeley's development, the stuff in *Pieces* [...], where the primary interest is language process/energy released by an intensity of perception given closeup to the elements of language (letters, syllables, words) in the process of their self-formation, *saying* what gets said in such poems as 'Numbers', calling things into being maybe there before ('Cup. / Bowl. / Saucer. / Full.') & maybe never.<sup>300</sup>

<sup>299</sup> Perelman, 'Here and Now on Paper', *The Marginalization of Poetry*, p. 44.

<sup>300</sup> Grenier, 'A Packet for Robert Creeley', p. 422.

The notion of poetic creation, 'calling things into being', expressed here is important to Grenier, and it is a topic to which I will return.

One section in *Series: Poems 1967-1971* (1978) is titled 'For Robert Creeley', and stands as both a tribute to Creeley and an implicit statement of Grenier's right to be included in the Creeley tradition. With its clusters of brief lines separated by dots, it visually resembles Creeley's *Pieces*. Grenier's poems in 'For Robert Creeley' are more easily identifiable as units than many of those in *Pieces*. But there is a sense of immediacy in the poems, as if they appear on the page at the moment the thought or sensation that inspires them occurs. For example, one poem begins with insomniac worries—if it's impossible to 'sleep in the morning / for some reason // then I'll'—and in the next line switches to 'feeling sleepy / now', as if the sensation of sleepiness has interrupted the thought about the consequences of not sleeping. In this way Grenier's poems emphasise the openness of poetic process rather than the 'closed' poem or product. Although the lines in these Grenier poems are brief, typically containing one, two, or three words, there is not yet the sense of that intense close up look at the elements of language he would speak of in the 1978 essay quoted above.<sup>301</sup>

Grenier has identified *Sentences*, written between 1972 and 1978, as the beginning of his exploration of narrative. The work was Grenier's attempt to 'stop time',<sup>302</sup> allowing sufficient attention to each individual poem and different narrative rhythms and patterns. The printing of the 500 poems in *Sentences* on separate, loose, index cards encourages reading them in any order and any spatial configuration in

<sup>301</sup> Since 'For Robert Creeley' was published in *Series*, the book that collected work between 1967 and 1971, it must have been written earlier than the essay, which was composed specifically for the special issue of *Boundary 2* devoted to Creeley in 1978. Several sections intervene between 'For Robert Creeley' and 'Fall Winter Family Home', which is dated August 1970-January 1971. *Pieces* was published in 1969, so the poems for Creeley may represent an initial response to the older poet's book, and could be dated 1969 or early 1970.

<sup>302</sup> *Attention: Seven Narratives* (Canton, New York: Glover Publishing, for the Institute of Further Studies, 1985), p. 11. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

which the cards can be placed. In constructing his work in this way, Grenier attempts to subvert the sense that the order of events is fixed, preordained. As the poem 'PATTERNED' puts it, there are 'different number of different patterned responses possible'. *Sentences* is, then, based on a slightly different concept of the open poem than that in which the focus is on the process rather than the finished product. Perelman calls it 'Grenier's answer to the question of *Pieces*',<sup>303</sup> and it is a novel solution to the issue of how to retain a sense of openness in a published work. Grenier's innovation is to allow the reader to participate in constructing *Sentences* by rearranging it at will.

Grenier's overall conception of the work is inventive, but the poems themselves do not represent a considerable advance. The poems in *Sentences* are similar to the later poems in *Series*, though few of those in *Sentences* have titles. Domestic events are recorded, as are Amy's sayings, and there are a number of one-word poems, such as 'nearer' and 'slew'. Grenier is frequently playful with words, as in the poem 'i n t e r o p e r o p t a t a t i v e'. Several words are contained within this one, suggesting the optative nature of the interpretative act. But in all these respects, he is doing little more than Saroyan had done in the 1960s. *Sentences* may still be Grenier's most famous work,<sup>304</sup> and its construction is ingenious, but his most distinctive work was yet to come.

*A Day at the Beach* (1984)<sup>305</sup> is divided into the sections 'Morning', 'Midday', and 'Afternoon / Evening'. The poems have the immediacy of consciousness impinged upon by people, animals, weather, and objects in the physical setting. The title 'HERE WE HAVE' gives the sense of the moment of encounter with a 'piece of foam I can bring that back'. Other titles are juxtaposed with the words in the poem,

<sup>303</sup> Perelman, 'Here and Now on Paper', p. 46.

<sup>304</sup> I suspect that his 'scrawl' poems will soon surpass it in notoriety.

<sup>305</sup> Grenier, *A Day at the Beach* (New York: Roof, 1984).

enhancing the feeling of actuality, of experiencing more than one sensation or registering more than one event or fact at once. In 'NO MORE BREAD ON THE END OF THE TABLE', for example, the single line reads 'what's that I hear being sung'.

Focusing on brief moments of consciousness and on sensory perceptions is a reductive procedure, even if some of those moments involve more than one sensation. Only occasionally is there an attempt to connect the things and feelings in the poems to socio-political issues. The piece of foam found on the beach, for example, does not lead to a discourse on environmental degradation. At other times, larger themes are addressed, but Grenier approaches them via Minimalism. For example, 'SEA':

shore

primitive

home of man

invokes the origins of the human race, but does so with a mere five words. Its simplicity is appropriate to its theme, its form as 'primitive' as the conditions of existence to which it refers.

The poems in *A Day at the Beach* are not typeset, but appear as they would composed on the typewriter. Thus there are no italics in the book, but there are underlinings. The materiality of the words as ink stamped upon paper is highlighted with this effect. But this is precisely what Saroyan had done years before, and the poems themselves do not go beyond what Grenier (or Saroyan) had accomplished previously. Only rarely does the emphasised materiality of the words result in their having a status as written objects that cannot be translated into speech, or rendered typographically. Some of the poems in *A Day at the Beach* are more expansive than those in *Sentences*, but they are still brief enough for three to appear on each page.

They are Minimalist in unit, with very brief lines; in scale, with only a few lines or even words; in form and style, with little in the way of formal patterning or stylistic flourish; and in material, because of their focus on the immediate context.

Many of the poems in *Phantom Anthems* (1986), which also appears typed rather than typographically designed, are more expansive still, longer than in *A Day at the Beach*, *Sentences*, and the later sections of *Series*. Although in this respect *Phantom Anthems* is a temporary departure from the Minimalism apparent in those books, there are some Minimalist poems included in it. More importantly, it is in this book that Grenier begins to explore poetic modes that are distinctly his own. *Phantom Anthems* opens with a poem mentioning ‘WCW’s garage after his death’ followed by a poem for Creeley: ‘HAS FADED IN PART BUT MAGNIFICENT ALSO LATE (for RC / MIRRORS)’.<sup>306</sup> It is interesting that Grenier mentions Williams’s demise and Creeley’s aging and ‘fading’ in the book in which he first begins to explore territory uniquely his own.

Broader social and political concerns are directly addressed in some of the poems here, though in a manner that Grenier would not continue. But even in some of the political poems, a self-reflexive attitude begins to take over, a more pointed and explicit concern with the writing itself. The title ‘AN ALEXANDRIAN AND A FOURTEENER’ directs attention to the syllabic quantity of the lines that follow, but the content is ironically political:

must be a military plane but if it doesn’t bomb

what good is it to us except to spend money

Concern with the writing process also intrudes upon the observations in ‘MOONSET AT SUNRISE IS’

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<sup>306</sup> *Phantom Anthems* (Oakland, California: O Books, 1986), n.p.

burning the candle at both ends  
 why not use commas dashes semicolons the whole lot  
 though the punctuation marks mentioned are notably absent.

Other poems seem to be based on rhythm and pattern, including 'EARLY  
 MIDDLE AGE':

ooh whee ooh ooh whee  
 ooh ooh whee ooh ooh whee  
 ooh whee      ooh ooh whee  
 ooh whee      ooh ooh whee

This may be an example of Grenier's claim that

a poet can still take on the line as a musical bar—that which is  
 wonderfully Williams', Pound's, & Creeley's accomplished measure—  
 no metaphor if a piece of music is truly the occasion (proceeding)  
 undertaken by the poem.

In the same essay, Grenier identifies the poem with which *Phantom Anthem* ends,  
 'BACH FIVE', as an attempt to "'transcribe" the sarabande in Bach's Suite For  
 Unaccompanied Cello in C-Minor'.<sup>307</sup>

Musicality may have been the driving force behind the composition of 'BACH  
 FIVE', which is dedicated to Lyn Hejinian,<sup>308</sup> but I detect another agenda at work in  
 it. Here is the poem:

1	2	3	4	5	
1	2	3	4	5	
1	2	3	4	5	&
1	2	3	4	5	

<sup>307</sup> Grenier, 'Line', in Robert-Joseph Frank and Henry M. Sayre, *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 211. There may be a nod to Zukofsky in Grenier's choice of music, since "A" is partially based on Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*.

<sup>308</sup> Although the poem was dedicated to Hejinian, Grenier told Jonathan Skinner that 'it didn't work for her'. Skinner, "'I think birds took": Talking with Grenier About *Sentences Toward Birds*', *Verdure*, no. 3-4 (September-February 2001), p. 82.



1      2      3      4      5      &

1      2      3      4      5      &

1      2      3      4      5      &

one

1      2      3      4      five

1      2      3      4      five

1      2      3      4      five      &

1      2      3      4      five      and

two    3      4      5      &

1      2      3      4      5      &

1      2      3      4      5      &

one    2      3      4      5      &

one    2      3      4      five      and

one    2      3      4      five      and

one    2      3      4      five      and

one    two    three    four    five

This poem may well be related to Creeley's 'A Piece' from *Words*, 'One and / one, two, / three', and perhaps to his 'Numbers' from *Pieces*. It also has a precedent in Grenier's own 'TWO', from *A Day at the Beach*:

& two

four

three

six

seven

Creeley, of course, identified 'A Piece' as 'central to all possibilities of statement' (CP 42), and Grenier connects it with the notion of 'organicism of form'.<sup>309</sup> But in 'BACH FIVE' I see the written aspect of language begin to assert itself far more strongly than it had in Grenier's poems in previous books.

Along with the transcription of a rhythmic pattern in 'BACH FIVE' is a positing of difference between elements as written, '1' and 'one', '&' and 'and'. These differences do not exist in a spoken register. They are present only in writing. Certainly one may refer to the 'number' as opposed to the 'word' 1/one, but as my sentence demonstrates, they are not identical as written elements, despite their reference to a single concept. '&' means the same as 'and', but the symbol and the word (as well as the name 'ampersand') are materially different from one another.<sup>310</sup> In using only numbers (plus 'and' and '&') in his poem, Grenier is undercutting its referential function. It may, as he says, be based on the pattern in a piece of music by Bach, but numbers unattached to nouns can only be themselves.

*Phantom Anthems* also includes a typed draft of a poem with Grenier's handwritten revisions, and there are hand-drawn stars on pages in the book marking divisions. These signify the beginning of Grenier's experiments with handwritten elements in his work, a feature that has recently come to dominate it. Just as the written words 'one' and 'and' are not identical with the characters '1' and '&', Grenier's handwritten poems are at best imperfectly rendered in type. The idea of poems as objects in the world is important to Grenier's poetics. Hand-drawn poems

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<sup>309</sup> 'A Packet for Robert Creeley', p. 424.

<sup>310</sup> Grenier had registered this difference previously, in 'light & / and shade', from *Sentences*.

that cannot be translated into type have a mode of existence as material objects that cannot be casually read through for the meaning they represent, or the thing or idea to which they refer. As objects, they have a certain 'truth': they are themselves, whereas lying is a function of reference. The following lines from Creeley's *Pieces* seem to address this concept:

The pen,  
the lines it  
leaves, forms  
divine—nor  
laugh nor giggle.  
This prescription  
is true.  
Truth is a scrawl,  
all told  
in all. (36)

The idea that 'Truth is a scrawl' seems especially relevant since Grenier's hand-drawn poems have become known as his 'scrawl' poems.

Grenier connects truth with narrative in *Attention: Seven Narratives* (1985).

There he says that 'narrative is a means to tell the truth' (16), and speaks of narration as '*the moral responsibility for the writer-fool*' (7). He claims that '*All writing is essentially "narrative"—not only storytelling / prose—but any combination of letters, that moves in time*' (23); therefore he conceives of poetry as essentially narrative. For him, the business of the poet is creation, not mere depiction of the world. The '*task of narrative* (despite all current "theory" / "evidence" otherwise)—*words must be "somehow" the same things as things*' (27). This belief is connected both to Grenier's environmental concerns and to his attempts to thwart narrative predetermination. He insists that the reader participate in poetic creation, that the activity of reading is itself the construction of a narrative. As he put it elsewhere, 'Creation is the issue, co-

positing, not “meaning””.<sup>311</sup> ‘Essentially, the reader makes the narrative’, he says in *Attention*, but with characteristic ambiguity goes on to ask ‘*the writer, as a reader, makes the narrative?*’ (24). These notions represent a ‘democratization of syntax-sequence’. Grenier’s rallying cries are ‘Demote the fixed!’, and ‘Totalitarian view of what looks like the “normal course of things” “inevitably” nowadays *downfall* toward depletion of the planet, *begone!*’ (14). Writers’ and readers’ creativity allow the possibility of rewriting scripts in which the world ends as the result of global war or environmental catastrophe, hence the moral function of narrative. Grenier’s position on this issue accords with that of Roland Barthes in ‘The Death of the Author’ and Michel Foucault in ‘What Is an Author?’. The open work, to which the reader must actively contribute, makes possible plots and outcomes other than those ordained by the authoritative figure of the ‘Author-God’, and thus permits hope for the future.<sup>312</sup>

Grenier’s Minimalist poetry may seem, on the one hand, utterly simple because it is composed of so few words and lines. But a strategy Grenier adopts to elicit creative activity on the part of the reader is to make reading his poems difficult. As Brian Reed puts it, ‘by distracting readers, by making them ponder irrational connections, Grenier’s peculiar handwriting thus defeats the text’s move toward a unitary moral’.<sup>313</sup> Most of the poems in *What I Believe, Transpiration / Transpiring, Minnesota* (1991) are handwritten, and some feature the overlapping of words and letters that is common in Grenier’s poetry of the 1990s. A line in a poem dedicated to John Keats invokes ‘ONLY HOPE’, and in another, the word ‘QUIET’ is faintly

<sup>311</sup> ‘Notes on Coolidge’, in *The American Tree*, p. 533.

<sup>312</sup> See Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Modern Literary Theory*, eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 2001), pp. 188-189 and Michel Foucault, ‘What Is an Author?’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Volume 2 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (London: Allen Lane, 1994), p. 206. These essays will be discussed further in the chapter on David Markson.

<sup>313</sup> Brian Reed, ‘The Baseness of Robert Grenier’s Visual Poetics’, *Verdure*, no. 3-4 (Winter-Spring 2001), p. 69.

written over the line ‘—truth (shape) beauty—’. One poem called ‘FATE’ includes a drawing of the moon as a skull. Rebellion against an authoritative figure is also a struggle against a God who has prescribed death for all human beings. Grenier’s fear is not just for his own life, but for the future of the planet. The epigraph to *Transpiration / Transpiring* (1989) reads ‘In all cases, the effect of man on the underground environment was negative’. The poem ‘PLEASE’ is a plea for proper management of the world.

‘INNOCENTLY’ is another poem expressing environmentalist sentiments:

try not to destroy  
the entire to  
rain the land  
within all within  
reach

Although ‘INNOCENTLY’ is simple in diction and quite brief, and its rough, handwritten form in big letters give it a naïve quality that is reinforced by the title, there is more to it than first appears. Grenier’s playfulness is glimpsed in the fact that the underlined words ‘to / rain’ can be read as their homophone ‘terrain’, ‘the land’ becoming an appositive in a move that is for him ‘characteristically punning’, as Alan Golding would put it.<sup>314</sup> On a more serious note, the mention of rain in the context of destruction of the land brings to mind acid rain. The title makes it possible to read the poem as a plea from those who have not sinned to a God who has mandated death and threatens to ‘destroy’ ‘all’ by means of a flood. The phrase ‘the land / within’ perhaps refers to the realm of poetic creation, the place where writers and readers construct narratives that counter the ‘totalitarian’ stories in which the world ends. There is no

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<sup>314</sup> Golding, ‘Language Writing, Transitional Materialities, and Digital Poetics’, MMLA 2003, *The Society for Critical Exchange*, [http://www.cwru.edu/afil/sce/Texts\\_2003/Golding/htm](http://www.cwru.edu/afil/sce/Texts_2003/Golding/htm).

reference in this poem to specific corporations guilty of polluting the earth, to governments or officials whose policies contribute to the degradation of the earth, or to economic systems driving environmentally irresponsible practices. Grenier's poem addresses social and political concerns in a Minimalist fashion, by invoking the essence of the matter: the destruction of the earth.

Another poem in *Transpiration / Transpiring* links societal and generic functions more explicitly. This poem is more difficult to transcribe into type because some words are placed between lines, some are crossed out, and others are overwritten, and the words vary somewhat in size and spacing. It is not entirely clear whether what I am reading here as one poem is not in fact two, but given Grenier's belief in the creative function of the reader, I choose to discuss it here as a single poem.<sup>315</sup> Here is an approximation of all but the last three or so lines, including the title:

SHAPE SHAPES  
 WHAT SHAPES SHAPE ANYWAY  
           ?       (TODAY)  
what shapes shape anyway  
 talks in my skull past  
 listening while I am alive  
 W H I C H  
this could be said to be

The next line looks as though it was initially written 'a cultural social ? function', but 'social' is crossed out. 'societal' is written in lowercase above it, and larger, in capitals, below it. The following line has three word positions. The first word is 'somehow', and the second is 'probably', with 'possibly' above it. The final word

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<sup>315</sup> I say that it could be two poems because all the poems in *Transpiration / Transpiring* (*What I Believe, Transpiration / Transpiring, Minnesota* [Oakland, California: O Books, 1991]) are Xerox copies from a notebook. Each Xeroxed page reproduces one opening of the notebook, thus two pages. In many cases, Grenier has written on the two pages in different orientations, making it much easier to see that there are two poems on a Xeroxed page. In this case, the writing looks of a piece. Since Grenier's titles tend to be in capital letters, though, 'WHICH', which appears just below the notebook seam, could be the title of a second poem.

position has several words written over one another in the same place. ‘Genetic’ is barely discernible as one of them, and at least one more also ends in –tic. The last line is

‘GENERIC’ (“function”)

with a question mark superimposed over the closing parentheses. The linking of societal, genetic, and generic functions bring together Grenier’s concerns about the potentially determining force of narrative without creative activity to countermand it.

Grenier’s recent ‘scrawl’ poems are handwritten in red, blue, black, and green ink. The use of colour makes it costly to reproduce them on paper—Stephen Ratcliffe estimates that a retail copy of a book with all 90 *r h y m m s* would cost \$650<sup>316</sup>—but selections such as *12 from r h y m m s* (1996) do make some available. They are most easily accessed in digital form, but this format results in some interesting paradoxes. In these poems, Grenier makes visible the result of the physical act of writing, of using a pen held in the hand and moving it across paper, illustrating his concept of ‘language as organ of body process’.<sup>317</sup> Karl Young comments on the scale in which the poems have been presented in his introduction to *10 r h y m m s* in the online *Light and Dust Anthology*. The format is too large for one entire page to be seen at a time on most computers. Young says that it ‘accurately reproduces the varying pressure of the author’s hand as it moves steadily, quickly, cautiously, or insistently. Just as important, in this version, line can’t be lost in abstraction. The form of presentation insists on detail, putting generalization aside’.<sup>318</sup> But as Alan Golding points out, ‘as much as Grenier wants to return his work to the body, it cannot’ if his poems are to be

<sup>316</sup> Stephen Ratcliffe, ‘Grenier’s “Scrawl”’, *Listening to Reading* (State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 119

<sup>317</sup> ‘A Packet for Robert Creeley’, p. 424.

<sup>318</sup> Young, ‘Introductory Note’ to Grenier, *10 Pages from r h y m m s*, *Light and Dust Anthology of Poetry*, <http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/grenier/lgrena00.htm>.

read, since they are most likely to be read in digital form. ‘From one point of view’, continues Golding,

Grenier’s recent work seems the absolute antithesis of new media poetry. From another, its digital presentation highlights—as if we needed reminding one more time—the (in this case literal) inaccessibility of any original: online, we experience the web presentation of slides of photographs of one-of-a-kind handwritten poems the originals of which most people will never see. Paradoxically, their online reproduction can be seen both as a fulfillment and a contradiction of the originals’ impulses towards personalized signature and fiercely specific attention to material texture.<sup>319</sup>

Young’s *Light and Dust Anthology* also displays Grenier’s ‘Greeting’ and ‘Pond I’, in the form of photos of the tiny notebook in which they were composed opened page by page in Grenier’s hands. ‘Greeting’ is starkly Minimalist in material, unit and style. It is made of only four words, two of them homophones. It has no punctuation, and no more than two words to a line. In the following rendition, each line represents a page opening of the small notebook in which they are written.

hello  
to you  
too Hello  
to you  
Hello to  
you Hello<sup>320</sup>

The evidence of Grenier’s hands in the writing on the page as well as their presence in the photos of the notebooks, offering the book up to the reader, make this simple greeting a personal one. If we do see Grenier’s poetry as ‘*the same things as things*’,

<sup>319</sup> Golding, ‘Language Writing, Transitional Materialities and Digital Poetics’.

<sup>320</sup> According to Karl Young, ‘the basic sonic dimension of this poem comes from an owl that lives near to the pond where Grenier often writes’. ‘Three Sets of Robert Grenier’s Illuminated Poems’, *Verdure*, no. 3-4 (September-February 2001), p. 53.



this 'thing' is a gift from the poet, one that does not even require the effort other works of his demand.

'Pond I' is longer and more complex. Forty-one photos of the open notebook pages are needed to reproduce it, though most of those have only one word. Here the reading is not so straightforward. Some of the letters in the words are not fully realised, and occasionally they seem to have a line too many. This makes identifying them difficult, and requires spending time with each page, looking carefully at the individual marks in order to be sure what is there. In some instances, words are written over others, and patience and concentration are necessary to make them out. By means of his 'scrawl', Grenier encourages the reader to attend to the materiality of the work (although this is, of course, complicated in digital form). If a narrative is present, it is minimally determined by the author. The creative effort required of the reader is also significant; the reader participates in constructing the poem instead of being dictated to by the author, in accordance with the Barthesian and Foucauldian theories mentioned above.

Despite the difficulties, the poem can be read, and it is full of natural elements, such as the pond, the sky, water, sun, reeds, a sapling, and various creatures: minnows, a coyote, and even a lion. Images eighteen through twenty-three read 'walking / to pond / death / plunge / into life / forms' (images 32-37), which together with the later sequence 'source / of all / life / me / minnows / reeds' mark the pond out as a creative space. The fecundity of the pond is interesting to consider in relation to two of Grenier's *r h y m m s* available at the *Light and Dust Anthology*. One consists of the words 'Always', in red, 'only', in blue, and 'plenum' in black, with a large, capital 'A' in green written over top of all three. The other also begins with 'Always', but this time in black ink, together with 'full' in blue. A large green circle is drawn

over the words, not quite containing them. A red line intersects the circle—or does it underline ‘Always’? The blue ‘full’ half circle rimmed in green echoes the fertile pond in *Pond I*, the half-circle above it like the dome of the sky, or the blackness of space, with the red line suggesting the creatures who live on the surface of the globe, at the horizon that demarcates earth and water from sky/space.<sup>321</sup>

Quoting Grenier’s essay ‘ON THE EMPTY / SUBLIME’,<sup>322</sup> Brian Reed

interprets him thus:

If language is an ‘organ of body process’, it is part of an excretory system, no different, really, from other corporeal means of eliminating waste (perspiration, micturition, defecation). Poetry, then, belongs to the mortal, corruptible realm, land of ‘SHIT’ and ‘SKULLS.’ Poetry may point to a ‘SPACE’ above or external to this realm, but that space is, in the final analysis, pure ‘EMPTINESS’, an absence that cannot be confused with the fullness of God’s presence.<sup>323</sup>

That black ‘Always’ above the blue ‘full’ is, according to Reed’s way of thinking, the empty space. Filling the space below, as nature does in the fecund pond and as poets do by creating things in the world is a messy business in defiance of the absolute and pure emptiness of space, or the unresponsiveness of a God who allows people to become mere ‘SKULLS’.

But how does the concept of fertile creativity, of making full, reconcile with Grenier’s Minimalism? Other poems in *r h y m m s* are so very Minimal as to not even have words. One is simply a bunch of scribbles in blue and green, completely unrecognisable as words or letters. Another is no more than two parallel curved lines, one green, one blue. In this case, one has the feeling, as Bob Perelman puts it, ‘of not

<sup>321</sup> Stephen Ratcliffe interprets a different poem similarly. There, he says, a blue line suggests ‘both horizon and the line the words position themselves in (on the page), the red of “hare on” like the red perhaps of its blood (beating) and the green of “such” such that it spirals back to where the trees (“arbor”) weren’t’. Ratcliffe goes on to say that Grenier’s response to this interpretation was that Ratcliffe himself ‘made up’ or ‘invented’ it, ‘that he didn’t himself write it’. This indicates, says Ratcliffe, the degree to which the reader must be involved in constructing these poems. ‘Grenier’s “Scrawl”’, p. 127.

<sup>322</sup> This essay was published online, and is no longer available. My only access to it has been through the quotations in Reed’s essay.

<sup>323</sup> Reed, ‘Baseness’.

having got to language',<sup>324</sup> yet poetry is minimally there, in the way the lines echo one another in shape: in this way the 'the impulse to "rhyme" shines through beyond any sense of "word"'.<sup>325</sup> It is a poem, but a poem that is Minimalist in form, by virtue of its 'rhyme'. Grenier's poems reside at the limit where 'the birth of intelligibility'<sup>326</sup> takes place, where one finds 'the word way back in the head that is the thought or feeling forming out of the "vast" silence / noise of consciousness experiencing world *all the time*'.<sup>327</sup> 'The special poetic or ontological value or magical potency that Grenier seems to be trying to create'<sup>328</sup> occurs in the instant.

Minimalism is appropriate to the brevity of the creative event, as it is to the brevity of life. 'Language tells, counts & shows, in moments of realization it comes into existence in particular words & dies, as every one does, & is reborn, again & again, in all manner of evanescent phenomena, flashes of light, heat, sound. Words'.<sup>329</sup> By asserting and affirming the smallest gesture, the merest 'scrawl', Grenier defies and battles against the vast emptiness of space and time and relentless death, or the tyrannical God who makes such a world possible. Minimalism, that is, becomes Grenier's means of addressing the most basic of human impulses, the will to live.

Grenier's Minimalism is not representative of Language Writing in general. Although there are reductive tendencies evident in the work of writers associated with that movement, they are countered by other factors. The desire on the part of most Language Writers to emphasise the materiality of language over its referential properties tends to result in a proliferation along the surface rather than in

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<sup>324</sup> Perelman, 'Here and Now', *The Marginalization of Poetry*, p. 53.

<sup>325</sup> Ron Silliman, "'thought or feeling forming'", *Verdure*, no. 3-4, p. 59.

<sup>326</sup> Perelman, p. 53.

<sup>327</sup> Grenier, 'On Speech'.

<sup>328</sup> Perelman, p. 53.

<sup>329</sup> Grenier, 'Notes on Coolidge', p. 538.

Minimalism. For example, Bob Perelman argues that, despite the paratactic nature of the 'New Sentence', and the focus on the unit it is meant to encourage, in practice it results in 'generating one sentence after another'. Furthermore, says Perelman, 'far from being fragments', Ron Silliman's sentences in *Ketjak* 'derive from a coherent, wide-ranging political analysis',<sup>330</sup> as opposed to the Minimalist approach of Grenier when he does address such issues at all.

The Minimalist writing of Creeley, Saroyan, and Grenier is part of a poetic tradition in America that advocates and practices formal reduction and that can be traced back to Modernism. This particular tradition does not represent the only version of Minimalism in American poetry, and I will present an example of an alternative in the work of Robert Lax in Chapter 4. But as I will show in the conclusion to this thesis, the tradition of Creeley, Saroyan, and Grenier is developing and flourishing in the work of other writers as well. Although it participates in a well-established trend, the poetry of Saroyan and Grenier is also innovative. Creeley says of Grenier, 'now and again someone becomes both innovator and paradigm for an art's next necessary step. That was Bob's fact in the seventies—and it still is'.<sup>331</sup> Minimalism in American poetry may have yet to reach its zenith, and the work of Creeley, Saroyan, and Grenier is likely to be influential in determining the specific direction it takes as it rises.

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<sup>330</sup> Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, pp. 65, 66.

<sup>331</sup> Creeley, 'Bob's Blessing', *Verdure*, no. 3-4, p. 84.

### CHAPTER 3: *Raymond Carver and Mary Robison*

The term 'Minimalism' in a literary context has perhaps been used most consistently in reference to the work of a group of American short story writers who became popular, and influential, in the late 1970s and the 1980s: Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, Amy Hempel, and Frederick Barthelme. 'Minimalism' has been generally accepted as a label for the work of these authors without their agreement, and critics continue to debate its appropriateness. I aim to bring the concept of literary Minimalism I have developed in the preceding chapters to bear on the work of two of them, Raymond Carver and Mary Robison.

My choice of Carver is an obvious one. Not only is Carver invariably included when lists of Minimalist short story writers are drawn up, he nearly always heads those lists. Carver is also an important figure in recent American literary history. He has been described as 'the most beloved short-story writer of our time' and 'an international icon of traditional American literary values'.<sup>332</sup> Such was his popularity and influence that he is credited with having made the short story itself 'possibly profitable and reasonably respectable'.<sup>333</sup> Many of his stories are said to be 'firmly established in the literary canon'.<sup>334</sup>

Carver also follows in the tradition of American Modernist practitioners of literary reduction. William L. Stull has noted that Carver's way is the 'modernist *via negativa* of brevity, understatement, and crafted omission'.<sup>335</sup> It has become commonplace to associate Carver's work with that of Hemingway. Carver himself

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<sup>332</sup> A. O. Scott, 'Looking for Raymond Carver', *The New York Review of Books*, 12 August 1999, p. 52.

<sup>333</sup> Charles E. May, 'Preface', Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Edwin Mellen, 1999), p. ix.

<sup>334</sup> D. T. Max, 'The Carver Chronicles', *The New York Times Magazine*, 9 August 1998, p. 36.

<sup>335</sup> William Stull, 'Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver', *Philological Quarterly* 64 (Winter 1985), p. 4.

often admitted that he greatly admired the older writer, and particularly *In Our Time*.<sup>336</sup>

When I was in my twenties I read some of Hemingway's early stories and the prose hit me. I would read and reread those stories and feel a physical excitement. The way his words felt on the page, their sound, was exciting.<sup>337</sup>

Pound was another literary model for Carver. Over his desk he kept a notecard bearing Pound's admonition: 'Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing, as distinct from the morality of ideas in the writing'. He also remarked favourably on Pound's editorial cuts to *The Waste Land*, and affirmed the need for writers to 'make it new', as Pound advised.<sup>338</sup> Finally, Carver is quoted as saying 'I read everything of [William Carlos] Williams that I could get my hands on when I was nineteen or twenty years old'.<sup>339</sup> Like Williams, Carver is a Minimalist in his choice of material, and the domestic is his most common subject.

Carver's 'Poem for Hemingway and W. C. Williams' is a tribute to the two Modernists. In the poem, the men come upon '3 fat trout' in a 'still pool'. Their attitudes toward the fish are different: Hemingway wants to 'kill, / that is catch & eat / the fish', whereas Williams pragmatically recognises the difficulty of accomplishing such a feat, and is content to let the fish 'simply hang there / always / in the clear water'. There is no resolution in the poem. Instead, Hemingway and Williams simply walk away and

discuss it as  
they disappear

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<sup>336</sup> See, for example, Robert Pope and Lisa McElhinny, 'Raymond Carver Speaking' (1982), and Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'An Interview with Raymond Carver' (1984), both in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (University Press of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 17, 110.

<sup>337</sup> Hansmaarten Tromp 'Any Good Writer Uses His Imagination to Convince the Reader' (1984), Gentry and Stull eds., *Conversations*, p. 83.

<sup>338</sup> Pope and McElhinny, p. 22, and Carver, 'On Writing', *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (London: Collins Harvill, 1985), p. 24.

<sup>339</sup> Michael Schumacher, 'Introduction: After the Fire, Into the Fire—An Interview with Raymond Carver', *Reasons to Believe: New Voices in American Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), p. 10.

into the fading trees  
& fields & light,  
upstream.<sup>340</sup>

The short staggered lines of this poem are reminiscent of much of Williams's work. The diction is simple, and the tone relatively flat, as is characteristic of Minimalist writing. There are also thematic implications for the influence of Hemingway and Williams on Carver in this poem. Hemingway's stories featuring hunting and fishing serve as a model for Carver's own work in this vein. Williams's attitude of observation without interference reflects the way in which Carver rarely resorts to authorial (or narratorial) intrusion in his stories. The lack of conclusion in favour of one attitude or the other is characteristic of the many Carver stories that appear to lack closure. It is fitting that Carver should express his poetic homage to Williams and Hemingway in this manner. His affiliation with these Modernists supports my argument that contemporary Minimalist practices are a continuation of reductive tendencies in American Modernism.

One aspect that should be borne in mind when considering Carver's relationship to American Modernism is the commitment to realism, as discussed in Chapter 1. The experimental nature of Modernist attempts to break away from the conventions of the literary realism that immediately preceded them made them appear strange, and thus obscured the realist premises on which they were based. Carver's work stood in stark contrast with fabulists and metafictionists such as John Barth, William Gass, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover. The difference was often ascribed to what seemed a quite obvious realism in the work of Carver and his associates. Carver's work, however, was often considered anti-experimental and

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<sup>340</sup> In Carver, *Fires*, p. 114.

indeed reactionary, and his work, along with that of Robison and others, was the subject of heated critical debate in the 1980s.

The term 'realism' was rarely far from the tips of critics' pens when discussing Minimalist fiction in the 1980s. This is more than adequately illustrated by the list of alternatives to 'Minimalism' as a label for this kind of writing that was compiled by Kim Herzinger in 1985. The list included: Dirty Realism, New Realism, Pop Realism, Neo-Domestic Neo Realism, Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism, Wised Up Realism, Designer Realism, Extra-Realism.<sup>341</sup> Despite the prevalence of realism in Minimalism and the tendency of a number of critics to view Minimalism as a retrograde step in the progress of American letters (a topic I will discuss), the more experimental aspects of Carver's work began to be noticed in the 1990s.<sup>342</sup>

Mary Robison has been included in lists of Minimalists almost as frequently as Carver. In fact, David Leavitt argues that 'Robison is in many ways the originator of the so-called minimalist short story practiced and made famous (or infamous) by such writers as Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, and Bobbie Ann Mason'.<sup>343</sup> Carver admired Robison's distinctive fictional style, and she has been identified as one of 'the main legatees of the Carver influence'.<sup>344</sup> Robison is best known for her short

<sup>341</sup> Kim Herzinger, 'Introduction: On the New Fiction', *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985), p. 8. Subsequent references to this volume in the footnotes will take the form *MR* 40/41.

<sup>342</sup> The discussion of Carver's experimentalism is often couched in terms of 'postmodernism'. See, for example: Kim Herzinger, 'Minimalism as a Postmodernism: Some Introductory Notes', *New Orleans Review* 16:3 (Fall 1989), pp. 73-81; Arthur A. Brown, 'Raymond Carver and Postmodern Humanism', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 31:2 (Winter 1990), pp. 125-136; Miriam Marty Clark, 'Contemporary Short Fiction and the Postmodern Condition', *Studies in Short Fiction* 32 (1995), pp. 147-159; Ann-Marie Karlsson, 'The Hyperrealistic Short Story: A Postmodern Twilight Zone', in *Criticism in the Twilight Zone: Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Politics*, eds. Danuta Zadworna-Fjellestad and Lennart Björk (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell, 1990), pp. 144-153; David Kaufman, 'Yuppie Postmodernism', *Arizona Quarterly* 47:2 (Summer 1991), pp. 93-116; and Claire Maniez, 'Quote-Unquote: Raymond Carver and Metafiction', *Journal of the Short Story in English* 33 (Autumn 1999), pp. 9-23.

<sup>343</sup> David Leavitt, 'The Unsung Voices', *Esquire* 105:2 (February 1986), p. 118.

<sup>344</sup> Sven Birkerts, 'The School of Gordon Lish', *An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Literature* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), p. 257.



fiction, which appeared frequently in the *New Yorker*. She has continued to publish in the years since Carver's death in 1988, and so her work provides an opportunity to examine the ongoing career of one of this particular group of Minimalists. Her most recent books include a retrospective collection of short fiction, *Tell Me* (which includes three new stories), published in 2002, and a novel (Robison's third) in 2001. Since in the 1970s and 1980s Minimalism was closely associated with the short story, and critics have often lamented Carver's failure to produce longer works of fiction, Robison's forays into the novel offer the chance to see what can be achieved by a Minimalist in that form. Her most recent novel, *Why Did I Ever*, is also her most Minimalist, and stands as evidence for the continued vitality of Minimalist fiction.

Minimalism was so popular in the U.S. in the early 1980s that it was deemed responsible for a 'renaissance' of the American short story. By 1986 it was possible to say that 'publication has boomed, interest is at an all-time high, and short story collections are now financially successful'.<sup>345</sup> Minimalism was specifically associated with the form of the short story. In her 1999 book on the work of Carver, Robison, and Amy Hempel, Cynthia Whitney Hallett argues that 'the basic design of minimalism appears to duplicate the most rudimentary functions of the short story as a genre'.<sup>346</sup> She argues that the Minimalist 'style is rooted in the classical functions of the short story', which

continues to be defined most often as compact, concentrated, concise, lean, and clean, with a particular unity and singleness of effect and as using 'contracted language' in unique rhythms that distinguish it from the novel. The short story offers a reading experience, as well as a reading of experience, different in kind rather than simply in degree

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<sup>345</sup> See Susan Mernit, 'The State of the Short Story', *Virginia Quarterly Review* 62 (1986), pp. 302-303, and Günter Leypoldt, *Casual Silences: The Poetics of Minimal Realism from Raymond Carver and the New Yorker School to Bret Easton Ellis*. (Trier, Germany: Wissenschaftlicher, 2001), pp. 18-19, 24, and 31.

<sup>346</sup> Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Edwin Mellen, 1999), p. 137. The mention of the 'single effect' is of course an allusion Edgar Allen Poe.

from that offered by other narrative forms, and good minimalist fiction applies these characteristics to an extreme.<sup>347</sup>

Realistic and with a contemporary setting, Minimalist fiction tended to de-emphasise plot, social, historical, or political context, and featured the most mundane speech and activities of its characters. The language of Minimalist fiction is 'ordinary', unembellished by the adjectives and adverbs that make for an 'elevation' or 'heightening' of language that is often regarded as a hallmark of the literary. Instead, it is 'flat', composed of everyday, workmanlike words arranged in simple sentences. These reductive tendencies drew the ire of critics and reviewers, and it became the subject of considerable critical controversy.

The vehemence of some of those who objected to Minimalist fiction is striking. They referred to it as a 'disease' (an 'epidemic', even), 'a low-grade infection of the banal'.<sup>348</sup> Minimalism was taken as evidence for 'the diminished state of contemporary fiction' in America, 'the most obvious example of our ongoing humiliation' in matters literary.<sup>349</sup> Characterised by 'narrowness, paucity, and opaqueness of vision' and stasis 'carried to the point of paralysis', its critics said, 'Minimalist fiction relinquishes authority', 'reflects a human retreat', and amounts to 'an abrogation of literary responsibility' and 'a repudiation of the idea of greatness'.<sup>350</sup> It is worth exploring what the critics had to say, and why literature that

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>348</sup> William Gass, 'A Failing Grade for the Present Tense', *New York Times Book Review*, 11 October 1987, p. 32; Charles Newman, 'In the Wake of the Wake', *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 94.

<sup>349</sup> Carol Iannone, 'The Fiction We Deserve', *Commentary* 83:6 (June 1987), p. 60; Newman, *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>350</sup> Robert Dunn, 'After Minimalism', p. 54, Diane Stevenson, 'Minimalist Fiction and Critical Doctrine', p. 84, John Biguenet, 'Notes of a Disaffected Reader: The Origins of Minimalism', p. 45, and Linsey Abrams, 'A Maximalist Looks at Some Minimalist Fiction', all in *MR* 40/41; Birkerts, 'The School of Gordon Lish', p. 262; and James Atlas, 'Less Is Less', *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1981, p. 98.

employed reductive methods was regarded as such a threat. I will begin with a consideration of the 'menace' Minimalism represented in 1980s America.<sup>351</sup>

Writing in the *Atlantic* in 1980, Thomas Griffith complained about what he called 'New Yorker fiction' and made Ann Beattie his primary target. Beattie had been publishing in the *New Yorker* since 1974, after submitting for years and receiving encouragement along with rejections from fiction editor Roger Angell. Her work quickly became popular with the magazine's readers.<sup>352</sup> Griffith called Beattie's writing 'value-free', and lamented its ironic voice, which, he said, is that of one who doesn't wish to change things.<sup>353</sup> These remarks set the tone for much of the criticism of Minimalism that was to ensue. Although Carver was later accused of being a member of the *New Yorker* school of fiction (and Beattie was later associated with Minimalism), he did not place his first story in the *New Yorker* until 1981, when he had already established a considerable reputation.

Carver began publishing in the 1960s, and one of his stories was included in *The Best American Short Stories 1967*. His first big break, however, came with the publication of 'Neighbors' in *Esquire* in 1971.<sup>354</sup> At the time Gordon Lish was editor of the magazine. Carver had met him a few years previously, and Lish encouraged him to submit his stories. Carver's first book with a major publisher, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, came out in 1976, and his next, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, was published in 1981 by Lish, who was by then working for Alfred A. Knopf. By the time reviews of *What We Talk About* began to appear, it was

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<sup>351</sup> Mark A. R. Facknitz, 'Raymond Carver and the Menace of Minimalism', *CEA Critic* 52:1-2 (Fall 1989-Winter 1990), pp. 62-73.

<sup>352</sup> Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (London: Duckworth, 2000), pp. 384-391.

<sup>353</sup> Thomas Griffith, 'Rejoice If You Can', *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1980, pp. 28-29.

<sup>354</sup> Joe Nodgren, 'Raymond Carver', *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 130, p. 67.

possible to say that Carver was 'becoming an Influence'.<sup>355</sup> One reviewer had already noted that the stories in the earlier book were 'very short and naked',<sup>356</sup> but it was in reviews of *What We Talk About* that the pared-down quality of Carver's stories became widely remarked. It was also in these reviews that the debate over Minimalism began to heat up.

One reviewer felt that in *What We Talk About* Carver had 'perfected' a 'pared down narrative technique' with 'stunning' results.<sup>357</sup> The stories were 'sometimes perfect', 'as sparingly clear as a fifth of iced Smirnoff', according to another.<sup>358</sup> Robert Houston called the description in the stories 'relentlessly minimal', and said that Carver's 'Influence' was 'pernicious', though it was 'a healthy perniciousness'; Houston's review was a favourable one.<sup>359</sup> But others were less sanguine about Carver's new book. He was accused of self-imitation,<sup>360</sup> and that was far from the worst of it. The reductive techniques in the stories have an impoverishing effect on the reader, argued David Kubal. The 'powers of feeling', he said, were not expanded in Carver's fiction, but shrunk.<sup>361</sup> James Atlas took Carver's work, along with that of Mary Robison, as representative of 'the barren idiom of our time', reflective of the abandonment of any literary responsibility other than to depict.<sup>362</sup> Atlas also noted the 'diminished' state (and size) of *What We Talk About* in comparison with Carver's previous book, and Michael Wood registered a new-found 'slickness' in the more

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<sup>355</sup> Robert Houston, 'A Stunning Inarticulateness', *The Nation*, 4 July 1981, p. 23.

<sup>356</sup> Thomas R. Edwards, 'The Short View', *New York Review of Books* 23, 1 April 1976, p. 35.

<sup>357</sup> Robert Towers, 'Low-Rent Tragedies', *New York Review of Books* 28:8, 14 May 1981, pp. 37-38.

<sup>358</sup> Donald Newlove, 'Fiction Briefs', *Saturday Review*, April 1981, p. 77.

<sup>359</sup> Houston, pp. 24, 23.

<sup>360</sup> Michael Wood, 'Stories Full of Edges and Silences', *New York Times Book Review*, 26 April 1981, p. 34.

<sup>361</sup> David Kubal, 'Fiction Chronicle', *Hudson Review* 34:3 (Autumn 1981), pp. 459-460.

<sup>362</sup> Atlas, 'Less Is Less', pp. 97-98

recent volume.<sup>363</sup> 'Why would a writer circumscribe his talent?' Atlas asked regarding the thinness of *What We Talk About*.<sup>364</sup>

Atlas was not the last to use the phrase 'Less Is Less' in a disparaging article on Minimalist fiction. Joshua Gilder also chose that title.<sup>365</sup> Gilder claimed that Minimalist writers formed a cohesive 'movement'. The two 'quintessential' Minimalists, according to Gilder, were Raymond Carver and Mary Robison, and he pointed to the *New Yorker* as the place to find Minimalist fiction. Gilder's principal objection to Minimalism was what he saw as the static nature of its stories. There was no movement of plot, and no character development, he said, and the narrowness of vision was so constrictive as to be fatal. The result was that, despite the argument for such fiction representing 'life as it is lived', the writers in question succeeded only in 'minimaliz[ing] life to the point where no real experience can fit'. Gilder implies that this is a moral failure, that, by contrast with writers who give 'meaningful order' to experience, Minimalists with their 'fear of life' have reduced life to the point where it, and action in it, can have no meaning.<sup>366</sup>

By 1985, critical unease about Minimalist fiction had reached fever pitch. That year the *Mississippi Review* published a special double issue on 'the new fiction'. The term 'Minimalism' was reluctantly settled upon to refer to the writing in question, even though it was deemed 'not a good term'. Most of the other contenders included, or implied the idea of, realism, and often suggested the ordinary concerns and settings of the stories. Editor Kim Herzinger tried valiantly to give Minimalism its due and to take it seriously, to come up with a considered list of its characteristics, and to define it in relation to the metafictional experiments of an earlier generation. His efforts were

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<sup>363</sup> Atlas, p. 98; Wood, p. 34.

<sup>364</sup> Atlas, p. 98.

<sup>365</sup> See also Madison Bell, 'Less Is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story', *Harper's*, April 1986, pp. 64-69.

<sup>366</sup> Joshua Gilder, 'Less Is Less', *The New Criterion*, February 1983, pp. 78-82.

undermined by his contributors, whose sometimes very brief pieces on the subject were largely dismissive.

Minimalism was relegated to the status of 'hackneyed', old-news journalism that merely reported on America's state of moral stasis.<sup>367</sup> The themes of passivity and moral paralysis recur again and again in the *Mississippi Review* essays, and some went so far as to make explicit connections between Minimalist fiction and certain political stances. Joe David Bellamy's essay was titled 'A Downpour of Literary Republicanism', and he solemnly reported that 'there is considerable evidence that [the "minimalist/realist" tendency] may be yet another symptom of the neo-conservative or Republican tide'.<sup>368</sup> Diane Stevenson agreed: the complacency and stasis in the work of Minimalist writers 'makes them, like their characters, emblematic of Reagan's America', she said.<sup>369</sup>

Minimalists were said to be 'quite unconcerned with form', and therefore were seen as failing on a strictly literary level as well as that of politics and morality.<sup>370</sup> This remark, by Raymond Federman, concurred with the views of Robert Dunn, who in a 1985 *New York Times Book Review* piece described the work of Carver, Robison, Frederick Barthelme, and Bobbie Ann Mason as 'Fiction that Shrinks from Life'. This 'private interest fiction', said Dunn, was perfectly at home in the time of the Reagan presidency.<sup>371</sup> Minimalist writers compared unfavourably with their more playfully self-conscious predecessors such as Heller, Kesey, Vonnegut, Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, and John Barth. The latter authors 'broke with convention, invented possibilities and shaped [the reader's] political-cultural consciousness', and this was

<sup>367</sup> Lee K. Abbott, 'A Short Note on Minimalism', *MR* 40/41, p. 23.

<sup>368</sup> Bellamy, 'A Downpour of Literary Republicanism', *MR* 40/41, p. 31.

<sup>369</sup> Stevenson, 'Minimalist Fiction and Critical Doctrine', *MR* 40/41, p. 89.

<sup>370</sup> Raymond Federman, 'A Short Note on Minimalism', *MR* 40/41, p. 57.

<sup>371</sup> Robert Dunn, 'Fiction That Shrinks from Life', *New York Times Book Review*, 30 June 1985, p. 24.

achieved, at least in part, by means of formal experimentation.<sup>372</sup> The realism and supposed literary conservatism of the Minimalists therefore amounted, it was thought, to political conservatism and moral failure.

Frank Lentricchia inveighed against the ‘minor, apolitical, domestic fiction’ of writers such as Carver, ‘fiction all but labeled “No expense of intellect required”’.<sup>373</sup> According to Lentricchia, Carver (among others) writes about the ‘triumphs and agonies of autonomous private individuals’, and is thus associated with the rhetoric of the political right that stresses individual rights and responsibilities as politically fundamental.<sup>374</sup> Lentricchia sees the realism of Carver’s writing as merely a surface effect achieved by use of ‘brand names, and other signs of advanced consumer culture’. Ultimately, fiction like Carver’s is dangerous because it sends readers ‘gliding off into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about what they are today’, rather than making them aware of the specific historical and political conditions under which they live.<sup>375</sup>

John Barth himself weighed in on the debate, in one of many articles on Minimalism and related topics that appeared on the first page of the *New York Times Book Review* in the 1980s.<sup>376</sup> Barth ostensibly wrote about the fiction of Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison, and Tobias Wolff, but the scope of his essay extended further. His breakdown of the ways in which writing can be Minimalist—in unit, form, scale, style, and material—is useful beyond a discussion of these particular authors (as I

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>373</sup> Lentricchia, ‘The American Writer as Bad Citizen’, *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Duke University Press, 1991), p. 3. Lentricchia’s essay was originally published in *Raritan* in 1989.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., pp. 3–4.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>376</sup> Barth, ‘A Few Words About Minimalism’. According to Günter Leypoldt, ‘The proliferation of commentaries on the new fiction is evident in the statistics of the *New York Times* archives: between 1980 and 1990, over fifty articles, reviews, or editorials in some way concerned with “minimalism” are listed’. *Casual Silences*, p. 17.

argued in the introduction to this thesis). Barth gave reasons for the popularity of Minimalism, one of which was its place in the cyclical pattern of literary preferences, following what might be called 'Maximalist' writing (including his own). Barth's treatment is balanced, carefully thought out, and generous, particularly when viewed in comparison to the contribution of his literary confrere, William Gass.

Gass awarded 'A Failing Grade for the Present Tense' in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1987. In his harshly critical article, with its cryptic complaints about an increase of women writers, he finds consolation only in the prospect that the popularity of Minimalism will eventually fade. Gass considers the term 'Minimalism' a 'misnomer' for 'that major social and artistic malaise' consisting of then-recent writing characterised by 'an increase in women, first persons and present tenses' and associated with Carver, Tobias Wolff, Jay McInerney, and 'a hundred authors each named Ann (or Anne)'.<sup>377</sup> The lack of adjectives and adverbs, the reduced number of words altogether, and the avoidance of imagery and poetic language were causes for objection. One of Gass's principal arguments seems to be with the way sentences are structured in Minimalist writing. The brief, simple sentences of Carver and the others compared unfavourably with those of Modernist authors such as Henry James and Proust who made ample use of subordination. 'Subordination requires judgment, evaluation', wrote Gass,<sup>378</sup> thus adding his voice to that of those who objected to the lack of an explicitly stated moral vision in Minimalist fiction.

As did so many others, Gass linked the 'present success of the short story', which was associated with the popularity of Minimalism, with the 'conservative atmosphere in our country', but he also voiced concerns about the role of creative writing programmes. The work of Carver and the other Minimalists was extremely

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<sup>377</sup> Gass, pp. 32, 34. Presumably those hundred authors include Ann Beattie and Anne Tyler.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., p. 35.



influential in these programmes at the time. This fact contributed to Gass's displeasure, but the larger issue was that of the 'manufacture of writers' in creative writing programmes, and their links to publishing. In what is, he suggests, a system serving the interests of the programmes themselves, students are 'fed' to commercial publishers.

Sven Birkerts expressed similar concerns about the profusion of stories from writing workshops that were 'choking the pages of literary magazines as well as glossies'.<sup>379</sup> He also lamented the 'total refusal of larger social connection' in Minimalist fiction.<sup>380</sup> But Birkerts goes further than Gass in naming the publishing-world villain responsible for the sorry state of American writing: Gordon Lish. Dubbing the Minimalist writers 'The School of Gordon Lish', Birkerts argues that Lish is extremely powerful, that he is the primary mover and shaker behind the success of Minimalism:

Lish is right now very much at the epicenter of American literary publishing. For one thing, he edits a fair number of 'hot' young novelists and story writers. But there are his other activities as well. Lish has for years conducted highly selective fiction workshops in New York and elsewhere—not infrequently assisting his stars into print and into publishing careers.<sup>381</sup>

Lish was the editor of, among others, Raymond Carver, Mary Robison, Amy Hempel, and Barry Hannah, and his influence, along with that of the *New Yorker*, in allowing the voices of Minimalist writers to be heard is undeniable. Joe David Bellamy made the connection between the influence of the editor and the magazine—as well as conservative political views—most explicit in his *Mississippi Review* essay. There he maintained that the factor

which might have been nearly enough to have propelled writers toward literary Republicanism single-handedly, has been the favor shown to

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<sup>379</sup> Birkerts, 'The School of Gordon Lish', p. 259.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., pp. 252-253.

the minimalist/realist impulse by two of our most important literary institutions: *The New Yorker* and Gordon Lish.<sup>382</sup>

*The New Yorker* was certainly an important venue for Minimalist writers. Of 114 stories published between 1975 and 1990 that Roland Sadowsky identifies as Minimalist, ninety-one appeared in the *New Yorker*.<sup>383</sup> But as Sadowsky points out, Minimalist short stories can hardly be said to have dominated fiction publication in the *New Yorker* in these years: they amount to just over 8% of the total number of stories in the magazine during that time. The critics' protests about the dominance of Minimalism seem out of proportion when these figures are considered.

The impact of Lish's editing on Carver's work is a relevant one when considering Carver as a Minimalist. Reviewers noted that Carver's 1981 collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* was remarkable for its 'relentlessly minimal' qualities.<sup>384</sup> At least three used the term 'stunning' in describing the impact of the brevity and starkness of the stories.<sup>385</sup> But they also detected a difference in quality in the new collection. Morris Dickstein pointed out that three stories from Carver's 1977 collection *Furious Seasons* showed up in *What We Talk About*, 'but so drastically rewritten that they are almost unrecognizable'. 'So Much Water So Close to Home' looked to Dickstein 'as if a Giacometti sculpting with words had hacked away at it in a wild frenzy'.<sup>386</sup> One should keep in mind that *What We Talk About* was the first Carver collection edited by Gordon Lish,<sup>387</sup> and it has since become apparent that Lish's editorial hand was a heavy one. In fact, it is arguable that Lish is largely

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<sup>382</sup> Bellamy, p. 37.

<sup>383</sup> Roland Sadowsky, 'The Minimalist Short Story: Its Definition, Writers, and (Small) Heyday', *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (1996), pp. 529-540.

<sup>384</sup> Houston, 'A Stunning Inarticulateness', p. 24.

<sup>385</sup> See Houston; David Kubal, 'Fiction Chronicle', *Hudson Review* 34:3 (Autumn 1981), p. 459; and Robert Towers, 'Low-Rent Tragedies', p. 37.

<sup>386</sup> Morris Dickstein, 'The Pursuit for the Ordinary', *Partisan Review* 58:3 (Summer 1991), pp. 508, 509.

<sup>387</sup> According to D. T. Max, 'Fat', which opens *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 'was one of the first stories Carver gave Lish to edit'. 'The Carver Chronicles', p. 37.

responsible for the 'Minimalist' nature of the stories in *What We Talk About*, and to a degree therefore for Carver's reputation as a Minimalist in general.

In a 1983 interview, Carver said of the stories in *What We Talk About*:

I knew I'd gone as far [...] as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end—writing stuff and publishing stuff I wouldn't want to read myself, and that's the truth.<sup>388</sup>

Almost immediately after the book was published, Carver attempted to distance himself from the term Minimalism, which had been used in a complimentary fashion to describe *What We Talk About*. In 1983, after a new collection, *Cathedral*, was published, he seemed to distance himself not only from 'Minimalism', but also from his own 1981 book. In the quotation above he almost seems to be saying that *What We Talk About* is only marginally readable.

There's something about 'minimalist' that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like. But all of the stories in the new book, the one called *Cathedral*, were written within an eighteen-month period; and in every one of them I feel this difference.<sup>389</sup>

Carver's use of 'but' to preface his statement about *Cathedral*, and his emphasis on the change in the new book suggest that he *does* associate *What We Talk About* with a 'smallness of vision and execution' that he dislikes. As it turns out, the 'smallness' of the stories was the result of Gordon Lish's editorial changes to the manuscript, and Carver was unhappy with the book even before it went to press.

That Lish made cuts in the stories for *What We Talk About* was not a complete secret, and apparently Lish himself boasted about his role in the revision of Carver's writing. Nevertheless, the issue did not receive full exposure until the publication of an article by D. T. Max in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1998 (ten years after

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<sup>388</sup> Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, 'Raymond Carver' (1983), in Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, eds. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 44.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Carver's death). On the basis of his research in the Lish papers at the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana, Max claims that Lish 'cut about half the original words and rewrote 10 of the 13 endings' of the stories in *What We Talk About*. Lish cut seventy percent of the words in 'Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit', says Max, and his editing of 'Tell the Women We're Going' was almost 'a wholesale rewrite'.<sup>390</sup> Carver begged Lish not to publish the book with the editorial cuts and changes, but Lish did not relent. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* was not a book that Carver felt was totally his own.<sup>391</sup>

An article by Brian Evenson based on his work in the Lish archives was blocked from publication by Carver's widow, Tess Gallagher. According to Evenson, Carver rejected the term Minimalism because it was *Lish*, not Carver himself, who was the Minimalist, who made *What We Talk About* a Minimalist work.<sup>392</sup> The question of whether Carver himself was a Minimalist writer is complicated by Lish's involvement in stories that preceded *What We Talk About*. Reviewers of Carver's first major collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, did notice in it what might be called Minimalist qualities. Yet Lish's hand was at work even here: he made cuts and changes to 'Fat', the opening story, even transposing it to the present tense that so offended Gass. 'Neighbors' and 'Are You a Doctor' were first published in *Esquire* under Lish's editorship, as was 'Fat', so it is not unlikely that he made changes there as well. And apparently Lish wrote the first sentence of 'They're Not Your Husband'.<sup>393</sup>

Lish's extensive input into (or editorial slashing of) some of Carver's stories might be seen to complicate the issue of the authorship of these stories. But even if

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<sup>390</sup> Max, pp. 37, 38. There are actually seventeen stories in the book.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

one takes the extreme view that Lish should receive credit to some extent as author of those stories, it is Carver's name with which they are inextricably associated, and Carver who will be remembered as pre-eminent among those known as Minimalist short story writers in his day. And as Richard Ford pointed out, Carver is ultimately responsible for the works published under his name.<sup>394</sup> As mentioned previously, Carver praised Pound's extensive editing and cutting of *The Waste Land*, without expressing any qualms about attributing the work to Eliot. In the remainder of this chapter, stories published under Carver's name will be treated as his, without consideration of any editorial intervention by Lish.

Frederick Barthelme was among the few who attempted to defend Minimalism against the critical onslaught. He joined the fray in a 1988 article in the *New York Times Book Review*, confessing his affiliation with Minimalism in 'On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean'. Barthelme placed Minimalism in context as a reaction to the writing of Gass, John Hawkes, John Barth, and his own brother, Donald Barthelme, writers to whom Minimalists had been unfavourably compared. At some point during his development as a writer he was struck, Barthelme says, with the realisation that 'people were more interesting than words [...] joined by the sense that ordinary experience—almost any ordinary experience—was essentially more complex and interesting than a well-contrived encounter with big-L Language'.<sup>395</sup> Barthelme's affirmation of the ordinary suggests that he places value on the 'real', and is in keeping with the Minimalism of material practised by writers I have already discussed in this thesis. His explanation of Minimalism as a response to and reaction against self-reflexive or metafictional writing echoes Barth's account of the cyclical nature of

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<sup>394</sup> See Sam Halpert, ... *When We Talk About Raymond Carver* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1991), p. 146.

<sup>395</sup> Frederick Barthelme, 'On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean', *New York Times Book Review*, 3 April 1988, p. 25.

literary popularity, the Wheel of Literary Fortune on which writers who rise must also descend.<sup>396</sup>

Unlike Barthelme, Carver attempted to evade being labelled a Minimalist, as noted above. Nevertheless, Carver seems to have concurred with Barthelme in regarding his fictional practice as a reaction to certain kinds of writing, exemplified by that of the authors Barthelme mentions. Carver preferred the simple diction and concentrated forms of writers like Hemingway and Williams over the extravagant and freewheeling style of Gass and Barth. Carver expressed his views on writing in a variety of publications, including essays, introductions, and interviews. In fact, it seems reasonable to consider the possibility that at least some of the critics of Minimalism were responding to his pronouncements.<sup>397</sup> In the closing paragraph of Carver's review of Donald Barthelme's 1979 book *Great Days* he says:

In too many of the other stories the author is, I hate to say it, sounding like Donald Barthelme imitating Donald Barthelme. The technical virtuosity and the inventiveness are there, but most of the inventions seemed strained this time around and bear little resemblance or relation to anything like 'fellow-feeling' and so, ultimately, are uninteresting in the extreme.<sup>398</sup>

For Carver as for Frederick Barthelme, what was of interest in a story was the way in which it related to people. Ordinary people and the commonplace events of their lives were in his view worth writing about. A method of writing that does not de-value the ordinary is appropriate to their stories. The story must be grounded in the ordinary

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<sup>396</sup> Günter Leypoldt makes a similar but more nuanced argument in his recent book *Casual Silences: The Poetics of Minimal Realism*. Leypoldt argues that it was the 'differential aesthetic potential' of what he calls Minimal Realism (including the work of Carver) in relation to the metafiction that immediately preceded it, that gave it such power and made it so popular in the 1980s. Leypoldt also says that the frequent repetition of the strategies of Minimal Realism, resulting in familiarity and loss of aesthetic potential, accounted for the style's decline.

<sup>397</sup> See 'A Storyteller's Shoptalk', *New York Times Book Review*, 15 February 1981, pp. 9, 18. This essay was later republished as 'On Writing'.

<sup>398</sup> 'Barthelme's Inhuman Comedies', *No Heroics, Please: Uncollected Writings* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1992), pp. 167-170. Carver begins the review with praise for Barthelme, saying 'I've been an admirer of Donald Barthelme's stories since college' (167). Note the echo of the charge of self-imitation above.

world, which is to say the real world. By contrast, we can assume, literature in which realism is regarded as an artificial convention that must be exposed by various playful and inventive means was less valuable.<sup>399</sup> Carver disliked 'tricks', and in his introductions to two short story collections he edited he made a point of saying that he found no room for 'innovative' or 'experimental' writing, particularly of the metafictional variety.<sup>400</sup>

Carver declared his allegiance to accuracy and precision in writing, to 'the use of clear and specific language'. 'The words can be so precise they may even sound flat', he admitted.<sup>401</sup> As I mentioned previously, Carver followed Pound and Hemingway in emphasising 'fundamental accuracy of statement' in fiction. Carver's ideas about 'accuracy' of statement and precision in writing suggest that it can be measured against some standard: it must be 'true'. Carver's position regarding precision and accuracy can thus be seen as echoing Hemingway's claim to begin with 'one true sentence'.<sup>402</sup> Carver's stories are often reports by first-person narrators of events they have witnessed. Just as Hemingway began his early attempts at prose with 'I have seen', so Carver's story 'Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit' opens 'I've seen some things'.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> It should be remembered that Carver was a follower of his former teacher, John Gardner, the author of *On Moral Fiction*. Gardner and Gass debated this issue. Gass is quoted as saying that 'the purpose of fiction is not primarily moral truth, but the creation of a verbal world'. Richard J. Schneider, 'William H. Gass', in Larry McCaffery, ed., *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), p. 384.

<sup>400</sup> 'A Storyteller's Shoptalk', p. 9; 'Introduction', *Best American Short Stories, 1986*, ed. Raymond Carver with Shannon Ravenel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. xiv, and 'Introduction' (with Tom Jenks), *American Short Story Masterpieces*, eds. Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. xiii.

<sup>401</sup> 'A Storyteller's Shoptalk', p. 18.

<sup>402</sup> Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 12.

<sup>403</sup> *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981; London: Harvill, 1996), p. 14. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

Carver repeatedly stressed literature's power to communicate. He wanted writers 'to carry news from their world to ours'.<sup>404</sup> This is a statement in favour of literary realism, and Carver's remarks are as morally charged as those of his critics, even if his concept of morality in fiction is a different one. Carver spoke of 'realistic fiction' as 'that most ancient of storytelling modes', and regards the ability simply to tell a good story as of lasting worth.<sup>405</sup> The sort of first-person narration to which Gass objected can be a means of highlighting what Carver regards as of essential importance to storytelling, its communicative function. Use of the first person can stress the relation of the story being told to an apparently real person, an individual human being.

Carver's choice of the short story form, as well as his frequent use of first-person narration, is also appropriate to the goal of telling stories that are true in that they accord with the nature of the real lives of ordinary people. What is lacking in Minimalism, say its critics, is a larger view, a social or political context for the events and people in the story in question. But some argue that the short story form itself may be unsuited for the function of presenting a broader context.

Frank O'Connor, in his well-known book on the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, argues that the short story by its very nature is suited to the portrayal of individuals, of outsiders, of people considered outside a social context. Whereas the novel presents society and characters as participants in it, the lonely short story character is without community, is isolated and individualistic. O'Connor remarks that while the novelist can develop an entire life, the short story writer can only depict a portion of a life, or can only come at it from a particular angle.<sup>406</sup> As Kasia Boddy puts it, 'While the method of the novel works to create a totality—a possible world, a context—in which

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<sup>404</sup> 'On Writing', p. 24.

<sup>405</sup> Carver and Jenks, 'Introduction', *American Short Story Masterpieces*, p. xiv.

<sup>406</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 42.



its parts necessarily are contained, the characteristic practice of the short story is to decontextualize',<sup>407</sup> to present characters and events in isolation. Previously I quoted Cynthia Whitney Hallett's argument that the short story is different in kind from other genres, and that Minimalism tended to emphasise those differences. Perhaps it was the very popularity of the Minimalist *short story*, which was credited for a resurgence of the genre, that caused the critics to grumble. To put it another way, it is possible that what the critics were after could only be found in the more expansive form of the novel. Carver's failure to produce a novel was cause for comment, and as recently as 2000, twelve years after Carver's death, Frank Kermode could not resist the temptation to speculate about what Carver might have achieved had he lived—and written at least a novella.<sup>408</sup>

Carver did supply reasons (often rather defensively) for working in his preferred form. There were practical difficulties, such as finding the time and space to write, that contributed to his choice of the short story. But he is also on record as having said that the short story form was more consistent with his view of the world. Carver himself said that only in a world that made sense, that hung together, that cohered, was a novel conceivable.<sup>409</sup> William Carlos Williams said the short story was the appropriate form in which to write about 'the people' during the Depression. Because of 'the briefness of their chronicles, its brokenness and heterogeneity', Williams argued, 'a novel was unthinkable'.<sup>410</sup> Carver's choice of the short story form is based on similar principles.

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<sup>407</sup> Kasia Boddy, *The Form of the Contemporary American Short Story*, PhD Thesis, King's College, Cambridge University, 1992, p. 14.

<sup>408</sup> Frank Kermode, 'No Tricks' (Review of *Call If You Need Me*), *London Review of Books* 22:20 (19 October 2000), [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/kerm01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/kerm01_.html). 26 May 2003.

<sup>409</sup> Carver, 'Fires', *Fires*, p. 35.

<sup>410</sup> Williams, 'A Beginning on the Short Story (Notes)', *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*, p. 300.

The nature and function of stories are relevant concepts to consider in a discussion of Carver's Minimalism. His characters frequently have stories to tell, or have important things to communicate with others, though often communication between characters breaks down. This concern is evident in a number of his story titles: 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', 'A Serious Talk', 'The Third Thing that Killed My Father Off', 'One More Thing'. Minimalist literature is frequently based on ideas about an essential feature of a particular form or genre; it makes use of reductive techniques to isolate or discover what is essential. Carver's emphasis on communication and the nature of stories is highlighted thematically and in the structure of his fictions, as well as in the nature of attempts at communication between his characters.

'Sacks' provides a clear example of this type of story. It exhibits Minimalism of style in its sentence structure, a reduction of stylistic features of the language that approaches the bare bones. Carver avoids the lengthy sentences, subordination, and authorial or narratorial judgement that Gass regards as the hallmark of 'literature'. Sentences such as 'That was last year' and 'I'm a book salesman' (38, 31) exemplify the clarity, simplicity and precision of the language, which also gives it a flat tone. 'Sacks' is also Minimalist in form by virtue of its relative lack of plot development. This is despite the fact that it is a framed tale, which means it contains more than one narrative level. The stories are cut short, resulting in Minimalism of form. It is this feature, truncation, that Ewing Campbell says 'caught the critics' attention' in *What We Talk About* and 'earned the author his celebrity status as America's premiere minimalist writer'.<sup>411</sup> Carver's method of reduction aimed to increase the 'threat, menace, or tension in a story'. The reader is left with a sense of the 'things that are

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<sup>411</sup> Ewing Campbell, *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p. 32.

left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things'.<sup>412</sup> These remarks seem deliberately to echo Hemingway's famous 'iceberg principle' of writing. Carver's methods of omission, truncation, and reduction mean that the reader must rely on his or her own experience and knowledge of the real world in order to make sense of the story.

'Sacks' begins:

It's October, a damp day. From my hotel window I can see too much of this Midwestern city. I can see lights coming on in some of the buildings, smoke from the tall stacks rising in a thick climb. I wish I didn't have to look. (31)

The narrator, whose name we later learn is Les, takes care to set the scene, thereby establishing the importance of the occasion of his telling the story in the frame, and thus the importance of the initial narrative level. Les goes on to explain to his second-person addressee that he is a salesman. He follows story-telling convention in locating his story by identifying several places in connection with his job: his 'home base', his 'territory', and the location of a conference he had been attending before deciding to go to Sacramento. There is a story, he says 'I want to pass along to you' (31). It is not entirely clear whether the story he wants to pass along is the one his father tells him in Sacramento, a story of marital infidelity, or whether it is the story of his meeting with his father in the airport on the occasion when the story is told. The interpretative burden is on the reader, who must make an effort to determine the subject and import of the story.

The title of the story itself, 'Sacks', serves to point to some correspondence or connection between the stories. Les's father is carrying 'a white confectionary sack' containing 'Almond Roca for Mary', Les's wife, and jellybeans for his children. When he presents the sack, the father warns 'Don't forget this when you leave' (32).

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<sup>412</sup> 'On Writing', p. 26.

A sack also features in the story the father, Mr. Palmer, tells his son. When Mr. Palmer was at home alone one day, a woman named Sally Wain came to the door to deliver something for Mrs. Palmer. As he tells the story, Sally 'just stands there holding this little paper sack and the receipt with it' (33). Mr. Palmer invites Sally in, and the two eventually begin an affair. Mr. Palmer's warning to Les not to forget the sack is an indirect admonishment to heed and remember the story of his affair with Sally, as well as the meeting between father and son.

The warning is reinforced by the appearance of salesmen in the various narrative levels. We have been told that the narrator is a salesman, and he is apparently one who travels. His territory covers several states, he is on a trip when he meets with his father, and he says that he is staying at a hotel at the story's beginning. Sally, the married woman who enters into an adulterous affair, is also a salesperson. During her first encounter with Mr. Palmer, Sally asks if he has 'heard the one about the traveling shoe-salesman who called on the widow woman' (36). Travelling salesmen are of course traditional subjects for risqué jokes, and the context makes it clear that Sally's tale is of such a nature. Sally's husband is a trucker, not a salesman, but his job does take him away from home for weeks at a time, which gives Sally and Mr. Palmer plenty of opportunities for sexual liaison. Thus the occupation of the narrator is one that the story stresses is associated with marital infidelity.

Mr. Palmer's affair with Sally ends when her husband, Larry, returns home unexpectedly to find the two of them together. The salesman seems concerned only about whether his father escaped a confrontation with Larry, but clearly Mr. Palmer wants him to find some other significance in it. He stares at Les 'as if [he] were crazy' 'You don't know anything, do you?' he asks. 'You don't know anything at all'. Mr. Palmer tells how Larry 'got down on the floor and cried', and how Sally cried too. He

seems to want to say more, Les remarks. Or ‘maybe he wanted me to say something’ (38), he continues, expressing a too-vague sense that he should be actively involved in extracting meaning from the story. What he might be expected to say Les doesn’t appear to know, and he seems to have been indifferent to the story. He has missed what his father no doubt wanted him to see: the pain and human damage caused by the affair.

The sacks in the stories and the association of salespeople and those whose jobs involve travel link them together. Carver’s inclusion of these details is so subtly handled that they might seem incidental. But they function in place of overt narratorial comments with regard to the mutual significance of the stories. ‘Sacks’ ends with Les’s realisation that he has indeed failed to heed his father’s words and has forgotten the confectionary sack:

On the way to Chicago, I remembered how I’d left his sack of gifts on the bar. Just as well. Mary didn’t need candy, Almond Roca or anything else.

That was last year. She needs it now even less. (38)

In these last sentences Les returns, ever so briefly, to the first level of narrative, that of the frame. That Mary now needs candy ‘even less’ is a cryptic statement. Information about Les and Mary’s relationship is omitted, and this effectively prevents a definitive interpretation. There is a touch of the menace or threat Carver loved, and it is achieved by means of omission.

What, we have to wonder, is the reason or occasion for Les’s telling the story? To whom does he tell it? Why does he choose that particular time, a year after the meeting with his father to relate it? The reader is placed in the same position with regard to Les’s tale as he was with his father’s story. Attention and active construction are required of the reader, just as they were of Les. His failure on both counts is a warning to us, one that is intensified by the subtle admonition from his father, and the

fact that he now regards the story as significant enough to retell. Stories such as Les's father's contain, it is suggested, vital information that we should heed, and by implication we should also listen carefully to what Les has to say. The sacks in the story may suggest the stories we carry around and offer each other. These stories are important to the people who tell them, and may prove to be valuable to those who hear them. Thus 'Sacks' stresses the essential function of storytelling as communication, and their role in human life.

'Popular Mechanics' is one of Carver's most starkly Minimalist tales. The characters in 'Popular Mechanics' are described only by the gender of their pronouns; they are not even assigned names. At a mere two pages, it is Minimalist in scale. Nearly the entire story is made up of dialogue between the man and the woman, and concise accounts of their actions. The story opens with a short paragraph that describes the bleak weather outdoors, seeming to begin a conventional story in which the reader is presented with a setting and a character or characters are introduced. But before going on to these expected conventions of storytelling, the narrator proclaims, 'But it was getting dark on the inside too'.<sup>413</sup> The next sentence is simply 'He was in the bedroom pushing clothes into a suitcase when she came to the door'. This is somewhat startling, and becomes more so when we realise that neither character will be named in this story, and that we will learn no more about them than what they do and say in the few minutes the action takes to transpire (or that it takes to read about it). The couple struggle physically over their baby, each pulling on an arm. The final sentence closes the story on a solemn note: 'In this manner, the issue was decided'. The Minimalist conclusion does not elaborate on the details, leaving it to the reader to infer in just what manner the issue was decided. The parable-like rendering of the

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<sup>413</sup> This suggests an omniscient narrator, unusual in Carver, where narration is usually in the first person or from a limited point of view, often very close to one character.

scene gives it an eerie feeling, whereas, with a fuller description it might descend into histrionics. Minimalism allows Carver to avoid excessive emotion in the telling of a tale brimming over with it.

The baby in Carver's story is at least metaphorically split in twain, irreparably damaged by the parents' relentless battling. A much more general subject than this particular family's troubles is therefore the subject of Carver's story; this is more than just an account of particular individuals, a fact that is reinforced by his use only of pronouns to identify the parents. This Minimalist move, together with his lack of specificity in delineating character and setting, and most importantly, his omission of the baby's fate, are what allow the story to take on such larger implications. Carver also avoids tired platitudes by using reductive methods.

'Popular Mechanics' is a parable, and calls to mind Kafka, who also worked in the parable form. Many critics make passing reference to Kafka in discussion of Carver's work, but few go into detail.<sup>414</sup> When the subject of Kafka came up in an interview, Carver did not comment on his writing.<sup>415</sup> 'The Father' (*Will You Please*, pp. 41-42) is a Kafkaesque story, although Carver has stated that it was influenced by his reading of William Carlos Williams.<sup>416</sup> In the story, perhaps Carver's briefest, a family discusses who the new baby resembles, and ends up in some distress because 'Daddy doesn't look like *anybody*!' The ending comes when they look at the father to confirm this. The final sentence reads: 'He had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression'. Arthur M. Saltzman says that 'Carver's vignette casts the father into a full-blown identity crisis', and 'depicts an instantaneous

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<sup>414</sup> See, for example, Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story*, p. 53; Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver*, (University of South Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 13, 33; Nessel, *The Stories of Raymond Carver*, pp. 3, 83, 86; and Stull, 'Beyond Hopelessville', p. 3. Stull disagrees with my assessment of 'Popular Mechanics' as a powerful story: in his view, it ends 'not with Solomonic wisdom, but with a sick joke'.

<sup>415</sup> McCaffery and Gregory, 'An Interview', p. 113.

<sup>416</sup> Schumacher, 'Introduction', p. 11.

confrontation with nothingness, as Carver nods to Alfred Hitchcock and Franz Kafka'.<sup>417</sup> I would argue instead that there is a more mundane issue at stake here, although it does gesture toward the larger themes Saltzman identifies.

The mother becomes nervous when specific attributions of resemblance are made. The grandmother says that the baby 'has his grandfather's lips'. "'I don't know ...'" the mother said. "I wouldn't say"". Her denial is stronger when one of the girls says that the baby's 'looks like somebody's nose', as if she wishes to forestall further consideration of just whose nose the baby's might take after. The grandmother too seems uncomfortable when confronted with the question of who *her* son looks like. When Phyllis says that Daddy looks like 'nobody', the grandmother warns her to 'Hush', then 'look[s] away and then back at the baby'. A few lines later, Phyllis says that Daddy 'has to look like *somebody*', and in the next sentence, 'All of them except the grandmother looked at the father, sitting at the table'. The 'obsession' (to use Carver's term) of this story is that of actual paternity. The mother and the grandmother may well have reason to worry about the fact that their sons don't resemble other family members, or don't look like who they should. Although it is extremely subtly suggested, doubt is raised in this story over just who 'The Father' is. Paternity is a perennial concern, as the fact that both the mother and the grandmother are presented as possibly having borne the child of one man while married to another illustrates. From this broader viewpoint, beyond the troubles facing the family in the story, the perspective can widen yet further to include the existential crisis of identity Saltzman sees.

It is evidence of Carver's skill and subtlety—and the effectiveness of his Minimalism—that he manages to evoke such large concerns in an extremely brief

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<sup>417</sup> Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver*, p. 33.



story, by describing, in plain terms, a simple domestic scene. 'The Father' is certainly realistic in terms of what it depicts at the surface level: a family at home, talking to one another about ordinary things. It represents a realism of empirical fact, but its primary virtue is that, by means of such representation, it also deals in metaphysical truth, that of the basic human anxiety over identity. Had Carver developed the story more fully, no doubt the empirical representation would have overshadowed the metaphysical aspect. But his Minimalist rendering allows it to show clearly through, as Saltzman's failure to notice the more mundane issue of physical paternity attests.

Mary Robison, along with Amy Hempel and Bette Pesetsky, has been designated one of 'the main legatees of the Carver influence'.<sup>418</sup> Her work may, then, be seen as a continuation of the Carver tradition, which itself had roots in American Modernism. Robison is frequently cited as one of the writers who, along with Carver, were responsible for the 'Renaissance' of the American short story in the 1980s. Like Carver, Robison had Gordon Lish for an editor. Carver himself considered Robison one of those authors whose 'stories are *their* stories and no one else's. They have their signature on them. I could pick up a story by John Cheever or by Stanley Elkin or by Mary Robison, and having never read the story before, I would know who had written it'.<sup>419</sup>

Robison's fiction is realistic in that it is set in a recognisably real world in which the laws of time and space and cause and effect apply. Her settings are contemporary and American. The quotidian nature of the events in her stories is suggested by the title of her first collection, *Days* (1979). Her characters are ordinary people, though they are often in the midst (or the aftermath) of a relationship crisis or

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<sup>418</sup> Sven Birkerts, 'The School of Gordon Lish,' p. 257.

<sup>419</sup> Kay Bonetti, 'Ray Carver: Keeping it Short' (1983), Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 57.

have alcohol or drug problems. Plot is noticeably absent from Robison's stories, and epiphanies are rare. Her narration is flat in tone, primarily devoted to listing events and surface details. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Robison's writing is her dialogue, and many of her stories are in the first person. Her stories are frequently divided into sections. In fact, division is such a common feature of her short stories that only three of the thirty stories in the retrospective collection *Tell Me* are *not* divided up.<sup>420</sup>

Robison's stylistic Minimalism can be seen in the flat tone of her prose, which is achieved by means of fairly simple sentence structure and by beginning most sentences with the subject.

Lola worked the rest of the afternoon. She took down the drapes, all over the house, and boxed them for the dry cleaner. She washed the insides of the windows. She carried a plastic transistor radio from room to room, tuned to a classical station. She checked in to the kitchen, at intervals, to tend a pot of fish chowder and some chicken breasts she was getting ready for the broiler. ('The Help' 52)

Lola's actions are related in a straightforward manner here, without narratorial comment, and with no embellishment.

The mundane flavour of Robison's stories is clear in the following scene from 'Independence Day'. The main character, Helen, is out of work and estranged from her husband. She is spending the summer at her father's house, where the air conditioner has broken down.

'This is Communism', Darla said, rapping a column in her newspaper. 'I think we whipped the wrong damn army.'

Mr. Kenning said, 'You know, girls, this is a workday for most people.'

'Tomorrow's Fourth of July,' Darla said. 'Not a workday. So you'd better get a repairman out here.' She wet the tip of her finger and turned a newspaper page. 'Helen, get me a Coke while you're over there.'

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<sup>420</sup> *Tell Me: 30 Stories* (New York: Counterpoint, 2002). Subsequent references to this collection will appear in parentheses in the text.

‘Watch the handle on the refrigerator’, Mr. Kenning said. ‘It’s falling off’. (161)

The last comments by Helen’s sister and father illustrate the extent to which Robison is committed to presenting the minutiae of everyday life. Details that seem irrelevant, like the view from the hotel window Les describes in ‘Sacks’, are allowed a place in the story. The request for a drink and warning about the refrigerator door handle are the sort of things said often in day-to-day existence, but most authors would opt instead for more consequential dialogue. Robison’s choice to include the remarks is typical of her stylistic Minimalism, her attention to mundane details, and the way in which she uses them to subtly build atmosphere and character. Like Carver and Hemingway, Robison seems to believe that ordinary, everyday situations are as revealing as dramatic ones.

Indeed, Robison’s treatment of dramatic situations is equally Minimalist. She maintains a level, flat tone when potentially emotional issues appear. As one reviewer put it, ‘Robison, when she writes in the omniscient voice, seems almost evil, so cold is the result’.<sup>421</sup> Her characters also tend to avoid emotional excess: ‘their lives may be pocked with grief, but they mention it in passing at most’.<sup>422</sup> ‘Apostasy’ consists of four discrete scenes. In the first Donna learns that her sister, a nun, is dying. The last three take place in Donna’s house, where a party has continued through the night and into the morning. The sister’s illness and impending death is mentioned only once more, in the third scene. It is still morning, and the party persists. The title suggests that it may serve as a comment on the lack of beliefs or principles of everyone at the party. Donna has been sleeping, and wakes to find two of the guests in her bedroom.

‘We had a pipe-smoking visitor’.  
‘We did? Who?’ Donna said. ‘This morning?’

<sup>421</sup> Elizabeth Inness-Brown, Review of *Days*, *Fiction International* 12 (1980), p. 282.

<sup>422</sup> Laura Miller, ‘It Only Hurts When I Breathe’, Review of *Tell Me*, *New York Times Online*, 10 November 2002, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), 14 June 2003.

‘About a half-hour ago’, Manditch said. ‘Want some of this?’  
 Donna took a drink from the wine bottle and coughed.  
 She said, ‘My sister has cancer’.  
 Proudhead sat down on a ladder-back chair and wadded a piece  
 of white underwear against his nose.  
 The bedroom door opened and Amy put her head in.  
 ‘I’m moving out’, she said.  
 ‘Fine’, Donna said. ‘Proudhead? Toss me my pants’. (171)

Later, Donna responds to someone’s remark that ‘Things are not so good’ by saying ‘Well, you’ve got that right’, which could be a comment on her sister’s condition. But this is not made clear either by further dialogue or by the narrator. As is so often the case in Carver and Hemingway, the reader is left to draw that conclusion. The story ends shortly thereafter.

‘Apostasy’ has no hint of a plot. There is no moment of recognition or change, and even Donna’s immediate reaction to her sister’s news is subdued. ‘Apostasy’ is a story in a minimal sense, by virtue of its relation of a sequence of events; it is Minimalist in form as well as in style. The failure of Donna’s friends to react to her announcement of her sister’s illness is not surprising given the tendency of Robison’s characters to ignore or misunderstand one another. They engage in witty, sometimes sarcastic, repartee, and the meaning of their remarks often escapes the notice of their interlocutors. In some cases, however, this tendency gives rise to humour, a feature of Robison’s fiction in which she does not resemble Carver or Hemingway.

In ‘Again, Again, Again’, Coach returns home from practice to find his wife and his colleague’s wife Carolyn drinking.

‘Wowie, zowie’, Carolyn Wylie said to him in greeting.  
 ‘I was just with your husband’, Coach said. He lowered himself  
 into a plastic sheathed armchair. ‘After today we concluded there’s no  
 way we can lose a single goddam game. Not with the people they’ve  
 given us’.  
 ‘You look great too’, Carolyn said.  
 ‘I do?’ Coach asked, confused.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> *Believe Them* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 94

Coach is clearly unaware that he has failed to acknowledge the presence (and beauty) of this woman who (we know from this and previous encounters) finds him attractive. He is oblivious to anything but his football team. Later in the same scene, a similar failed conversational transaction takes place between Coach and his wife. Coach says:

‘So we have a boy from Taft High, in Ohio. And this man—I am not bullshitting—can bench press four hundred pounds, and he can pass by anything on the field. It’d take a combat tank on caterpillar tread to stop him. This boy they call Stingray’.

Sherry sipped her brandy. She said, ‘Has anyone read the new Updike?’ (94)

Meanwhile, Coach and Sherry’s daughter Daphne is going on about how her father should change his hairstyle. Each of the conversants has his or her own agenda: Daphne the hair, Sherry the arts, Coach his team, and Carolyn her attempt to flirt with Coach. The reference to John Updike serves to indicate the gulf between husband and wife. She follows his account of the physical prowess of an athlete with a question about the intellectual and urbane Updike. In claiming a debt to Hemingway, Updike has said that the older writer ‘showed us all how much tension and complexity unalloyed dialogue can convey’.<sup>424</sup> Robison displays similar skill, but the humorous touch is her own.

The humour arises directly from the juxtaposition of the characters’ remarks. There is no interference on the part of the narrator. The narration merely facilitates the action; the story is reduced to a dispassionate presentation of empirical facts such as the characters’s movements plus the dialogue. In Robison’s hands, the failure of one person’s speech to reach another is funny. But it could be sad. The situation might be interpreted as a heart-breaking example of the inability of people to connect with one

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<sup>424</sup> Updike, ‘Foreword’, *The Early Stories: 1953-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. x.

another. Such isolation may in fact be related to Robison's tendency to fragment her stories, to break them into units, a topic I will address further.

Dialogue is perhaps Robison's chief means of characterisation, but first-person narrative is another device that allows Robison to develop her characters' voices.

Sometimes it is primarily the voice itself that is developed, with only indirect information given about the person talking, as in the early story 'Relations'.<sup>425</sup>

'Relations' is a Minimalist portrait of the narrator's cousin Junior. Junior appears without a background, as does the narrator. We are merely presented with the narrator's account of occasions on which she remembers seeing him. 'I saw my cousin Junior three times in San Francisco before we spoke to each other', the story opens. The statement is qualified in the next paragraph, which begins 'Actually, now that I think of it, it may have been in Chicago'. In the third paragraph the question of where Junior was seen is again raised—'Definitely it was San Francisco'—and in the fifth confirmed again: 'He took me to his apartment, and now I'm sure it was in California'. (*Days*, 112-113). The effect of all these attempts by the narrator to verify where it was she saw Junior is to give the piece the flavour of an immediate, unselfconscious relation of events. She is also unsure about somebody named Brad's last name, and whether he was Junior's friend, or her Aunt Barbara's, and whether the tape reels Junior carts around were in 'a string-handled Marshall Field sack' or a carton (112).

The narrator relates a couple of other bizarre encounters with Junior, one in which she picks him up at the airport only to have him ask to be dropped off in the middle of a field of weeds alongside the expressway. We learn in the final paragraph that the narrator 'only saw him one other time before I saw him dead at his funeral—

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<sup>425</sup> Robison, 'Relations', *Days* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 112-115. Subsequent references to *Days* will be cited in the text.

he was hit by a post office truck in a Florida crosswalk on his way to Disney World' (115). His journey toward the land of fantasy is cut short by a vehicle of mundane regularity, the postal truck. By the end we have the sense of Junior as a troubled, perhaps drug-addicted eccentric. The narrator is uncertain; she struggles to remember the facts about Junior. This story is in part about her effort to tell the story of Junior. It is being told as if it matters to her, or she thinks it has importance more generally. She makes an effort to get the details right. She makes no attempt to explain Junior's situation, to judge him, or to justify his actions; she simply describes what she has seen of him. Like Hemingway, Robison offers only the events and the facts as she knows them. She lets those who read her account draw their own conclusions about him. Her record of Junior is a tribute to him, not as a person of particular merit, but simply as a person who lived and died. Perhaps though, as with Carver's 'Sacks', the story is as much about the narrator as it is about Junior, and reflects her obsession with accuracy in the details of storytelling.

Just over half the stories in *An Amateur's Guide to the Night*, Robison's 1983 collection, are narrated in the first person, as are seven of the eleven stories in her 1988 *Believe Them*. This suggests that Robison increasingly felt it worked well for her. According to Michael McKenna, the more frequent use of first-person point of view results in 'a greater variety of narrative voices than in *Days*', and *Believe Them* demonstrates Robison's 'continued development of her distinctive first-person narration'.<sup>426</sup> Her first-person narrative may have 'developed' in her short fiction, but it did so *away* from the Minimalism of 'Relations'. In later stories, first-person narrators explain themselves more expansively, providing information that goes beyond what is minimally necessary.

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<sup>426</sup> Michael McKenna, 'Mary Robison', *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 130, pp. 279, 280.

Robison's experiments in Minimalism extend beyond a single form; she has developed and adapted some of the Minimalist features of her early short fiction to create a Minimalist novel. Her association with Minimalism in the 1980s, as one of the group of short story writers associated with the term, has led critics to think of her as working primarily in the short story form. But she has published three novels, and while her short stories seem not to have changed significantly, her novels are quite distinct from one another, and represent different ways of working. Her most recent, *Why Did I Ever* (2001), is her strongest contribution to Minimalism to date. This complicates her identification with a particular sort of Minimalist short story popular in the 1980s.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the arguments that the short story form is suitable to the portrayal of the isolated individual, or that it reflects a fragmented world that does not cohere. Robison's choice to exclude social or political commentary may indicate that she agrees with such views of the world. Her dialogue, I have suggested, also conveys the isolation of her characters from one another. But the division of her short stories into units may owe as much to a cinematic technique (perhaps like that Kenner attributed to Hemingway) as it does to an idea about the nature of the social world.<sup>427</sup> Robison's technique of breaking *Why Did I Ever* into sections seems to derive from a different principle, although the social isolation is still present in it, as is the tendency to avoid political issues.

*Why Did I Ever* represents a new development in Robison's Minimalism as well as in her career as a novelist. Her first novel does have what we might call a Minimalist title, *Oh!*, and it is Minimalist in style. Apart from what they say and do, there is no access to the characters' thoughts and feelings. The narration sticks strictly

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<sup>427</sup> It may be worth noting that Robison has worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood.



to the empirical details, to describing appearances, actions, and events. Originally published in 1981, *Oh!* grew out of a short story called 'The Help' (though elements from other Robison stories also appear in it).

*Subtraction*, Robison's 1991 novel, is constructed around themes related to the idea of the title. Robison's choice of title may also be significant in terms of her artistic practice. She has said that she prefers the term 'subtractionist' to 'Minimalist', because 'that at least implied some effort',<sup>428</sup> and suggests the active process of literary reduction. The concept of 'enantiotropy' also features in *Subtraction*. Paige, the narrator, has learned from her creative writing student Barney, a particle physicist, that enantiotropy 'is the method for something becoming its own opposite, which it does because of a critical pressure, usually; becomes the reverse of what it was or ever intended to be' (136). Paige and her unreliable husband Raf have doubles, or opposites. They are identifiable as such in part by having the same first initials. Pru is a theory-spouting, man-hating, acrobatic stripper who uses her sexuality as a weapon. Raymond, Raf's old friend who has been in love with Pru, but later falls for Paige, is a cleaned up version of Raf—he no longer drinks and has settled into marriage and family life.

Paige and Raymond have an affair, but she eventually sends him away. His parting remarks include his honest opinion of her poetry: he doesn't like it. 'My tastes', he says, 'whatever thing you make *is* you, no mistaking it' (213). She takes his comments to heart:

I retrieved, read, and deleted the long poem I had written on the road. There was nothing in there of Raymond or Mississippi or Raf or the storm that had seemed to follow me; nothing of driving or dreaming or hoping or falling down or phone calls or missing anybody. (214)

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<sup>428</sup> Quoted in Maureen Murray, Review of *Minimalism and the Short Story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* by Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Pif Magazine*, [www.pifmagazine.com/2000/08](http://www.pifmagazine.com/2000/08), accessed 19 April 2003.

She 'subtracts' all that before starting again. Although it is never stated, one might assume that the novel forms the new version of the work.

There may be an allusion to the complex, dense, and long work of writers such as Thomas Pynchon in the concept of enantiotropy mentioned above. Entropy is a major trope in Pynchon's work, and the title of one of his early stories.<sup>429</sup> It is significant that Paige discards the work based on enantiotropy, seemingly in favour of a composition that would stick more closely to her actual experiences. She has, in effect, chosen to focus on 'real' events, details, and feelings rather than a grand philosophical or scientific notion. Enantiotropy is a lofty concept that means nothing because it has no real connection with Paige's life.

*Subtraction* is worth further explication and exploration, but I will not undertake that here. Despite the reductionism indicated by its title and its rejection of enantiotropy as a constructive principle, it does not seem to be a Minimalist work. Robison's third novel, however, has an atomistic structure that is a common Minimalist device. *Why Did I Ever* comprises 536 brief sections. *Oh!* and *Subtraction* each had something resembling a plot, or at least a storyline, the displacement of the Cleveland family patriarch in the former, and Paige's recovery of and reconciliation with Raf in the latter. In a Minimalist move, Robison dispenses with plot in *Why Did I Ever*. Sections do often relate to those preceding or following them; although the novel is composed of discrete units, they are not entirely unrelated to one another. The Minimalism of form of *Why Did I Ever* is one that allows for unity of the whole, primarily by virtue of its single, first-person narrator. There are also sequences of events in the novel.

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<sup>429</sup> Pynchon, 'Entropy', *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984).

Because of the blank spaces between sections, *Why Did I Ever* has much less text and many fewer words than *Oh!* or *Subtraction*, though it has approximately the same number of pages (200 for *Why Did I Ever*, 209 for *Oh!*, and 216 for *Subtraction*). It is, therefore, Minimalist in scale as well as in unit. The sections are not chapters, as some reviewers have mistakenly called them,<sup>430</sup> but are in fact organised into fourteen larger units that are explicitly identified as chapters at the beginning of each.

As mentioned above, Robison had experimented with breaking her work into sections previously. The sections in the stories, however, are generally longer than those in *Why Did I Ever*. In the novel, the average is about three sections per page, whereas some of the stories consist of just two long parts, and many sections take up several pages each. Robison has reduced the units of her fiction to the minimum in *Why Did I Ever*. None of the stories has numbered parts, and in only one story, 'Your Errant Mom' (*Tell Me*, pp. 188-198), does Robison experiment with emphasising the separate units by giving them titles. There, as in *Why Did I Ever*, certain of these titles recur. But the numbering and titling of sections in the novel makes their status as constituent units more prominent than in the stories. For example, the four sections in the story 'Apostasy', mentioned above, are like scenes in a film. The divisions separate four sequences of events in limited amounts of continuous time. The logic behind the sections in *Why Did I Ever* is entirely different.

Each of the novel's sections is self-contained as a verbal unit. They do not necessarily function as scenes, as in 'Apostasy'. Some are recordings of Money's thoughts or reflections, such as:

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<sup>430</sup> Cathleen Schine, 'Days of Wine and Ritalin' (Review of *Why Did I Ever*), *New York Times*, Sunday, 25 November 2001, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), accessed 14 June 2003; and Darcy Cosper, 'Mary Robison Delights Again, with "Why Did I Ever"', *Houston Chronicle*, 26 January 2002, [www.houstonchronicle.com](http://www.houstonchronicle.com), accessed 19 April 2003.

367

In my head now, the mixed-up words to rallying war songs. Do you never get to sort through and wipe disk that stuff? (135)

And

164

I can close my eyes and, if I ever want to, go back in time and hear Paulie rehearsing for the dipshit school play, singing in his little sixth grade voice that he had then. (58)

These sections do not depict events, and do not further the action of the novel. They do help to develop Money's character. They do so not just by showing what is going on in her head, the contents of her mind, but also by illustrating her way of expressing things. The sections are on the one hand highly artificial in that they stand on their own; they are crafted as individual pieces complete in themselves. But they also may be representative of Money's natural mode of expression or the way in which thoughts and events impinge upon her consciousness.

The majority of the sections have numbered headings, but many have titles rather than numbers. The longest section, at three pages, has perhaps the longest title, 'That Was Connie Stevens Wasn't It Handing Out Samples of Cranberry Bread' (154-157). The shortest, number 121, consists of a single word: 'Huh' (45). Some of the section headings seem inexplicable, but others operate sometimes as wry comments on their content, and sometimes as contextualising information, or form part of what follows them, as titles of Minimalist poems and stories often do.<sup>431</sup> An example is what would be number 271 if it were numbered rather than titled:

*And Me*

I remember after the third and final husband left, I looked around to see what was different or changed—two lamps were broken, two chairs, my camera, one of the speakers, a couple windows, a couple

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<sup>431</sup> See, for example, the discussion of poems by Saroyan and Grenier in Chapter 2.

mirrors, drawers, cabinets, all handles and knobs, the bathroom, my car, the kitchen. (100)

The implication, of course, is that the narrator, Money Breton, has also been altered by the failure of the marriage, and was perhaps left damaged. Money does not describe her feelings here, but merely indicates the harm done to her by titling the section with two words that would fit grammatically at the end of the sentence and the list. One might argue that the title places her in a position of prominence with regard to the other items listed. On the other hand, by the time one reaches the end of the sentence, one may well move on to the next section without returning to reflect on the title.

The technique of inventory Money uses here, her list of things damaged, seems to represent an effort to take control after a traumatic event. In fact, the struggle to deal with the events of her life by placing them in a list may be relevant to the structure of the novel as a whole. Reducing difficult or painful experiences to manageable units that can then be manipulated into a numbered system is a way of gaining mastery over them. Money may not be able to cope with the issues and troubles in her life when she tries to deal with them as a complex whole. But when reduced to a series of small units, her life can be put into some sort of order that makes sense, even if that order is an enumerative one.<sup>432</sup> Perhaps stories serve just this sort of essential function in human life, that of helping us to make sense of difficult experiences by ordering them into some sort of form, although the form the stories take may vary.

One of the threads to be followed in *Why Did I Ever* involves Paulie, the son of the narrator. Early on, in section 27, Money says

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<sup>432</sup> Characters in Lydia Davis's fiction, which will be discussed in Chapter 5, make use of similar tactics.

I do know some horrible stories. One story about my son may never have an end to it. Or the story will have an end I don't want to know because it's horrible. Want to or not, I have to wait, wait, wait. (10)

And the reader must wait as well, as Money relates the horrible story about Paulie bit by bit. Gradually it is revealed that he has been the victim of a terrible sex crime, and we do eventually learn the fate of the criminal. Introducing Paulie's situation in this way arouses the reader's curiosity, and so creates a sense of expectation; thus Robison achieves a measure of suspense by the manner of its presentation. But it also seems likely that Money herself does not wish to deal with the enormity of the crime and its effect on Paulie. She fears that the story, when it is complete, a whole, will have an end so horrible she won't want to know it, so she reduces it to units she can relate one at a time.

Not everything in Money's life is as momentous as Paulie's situation. A minor thread in the novel is Money's search for her missing cat. Tales of Money's adventures in Hollywood, where she travels in connection with her scriptwriting job, form part of the novel. Robison's talent for humour is present in abundance. Whenever Dix, Money's 'moron New Boyfriend' (31), appears, we are guaranteed some fun at his expense. The issue of control is also apparent here, in that Money's wisecracks about Dix amount to transformation of information about him (some of which may be unpleasant or disappointing) into a self-contained verbal unit, that of a joke.

Some of the interest in the book resides in hearing more about such characters, including Money herself and her late-night drives around the South. Her life is undeniably American: she gets in her car and drives around in the middle of the night, sometimes to another town, sometimes to all-night stores or the 24-hour laundromat. Her fondness for driving alone, accountable to no one, in the self-contained privacy of

her vehicle, may be related to the isolation of Robison's characters from one another exhibited in their dialogue. Robison's fragmented novelistic style may in this way reflect her view of the world, without explicit commentary, in much the same way Carver's choice of the short story form was based on his view of the world as lacking in coherence.

The division of the novel, and of Money's life, into manageable bits may also be, as I have suggested, a survival strategy. In section 466, while Money is in California, we read:

What it takes to survive out here is *order*, I realize and say to myself, 'Divide the day into equal periods. See this travel alarm? You get up, don your uniform, move according to the bell'. (174)

To say that the division into sections of *Why Did I Ever* is meant to accurately reflect Money's experience is to read the novel as realistic. Yet the form seems highly artificial, because it departs from the familiar realistic style of the novel in which a narrator guides us through the story in a much more continuous manner. Robison has eliminated the narrative connections between the parts of her story. In some ways, the structure is analogous to a Cubist painting, attentively depicting the separate parts rather than focusing on the illusion of the whole. Or, as Gertrude Stein says of the work of Cézanne, each part is as important as any other, and as important as the whole.

Carver remarked that a novel is possible only in a world that makes sense. Robison seems to accept that the world does not make sense as a tightly plotted narrative, and accordingly, a plot in which all is explained and neatly tied up is absent from her novel. Robison is not making the point that fiction is necessarily inadequate to experience; rather, she has found a new structural method appropriate to experience. Despite her experimental methods, Robison is engaged in a very different

enterprise from that undertaken by the metafictionists to whom Minimalists were unfavourably compared in the 1980s. Metafiction can be seen as a 'critique of [...] realist narrative assumptions',<sup>433</sup> and is based on the idea that realism in literature is merely a matter of conventions that metafiction explicitly exposes; literature is incapable of depicting 'reality'. William Gass, who is said to have first used the term 'metafiction' in the late 1960s,<sup>434</sup> 'firmly believes that words are our ultimate reality and that they ought not to be required merely to mimic external reality'.<sup>435</sup>

Robison's experimental Minimalism also shows her addressing the inadequacies of the conventions of realism, but she does so with the conviction that reality can and should be represented in literature. In *Why Did I Ever* she has created a new form for the novel, and left realist assumptions intact. In doing so, she resembles the Modernists, whose experimental efforts to bring language and literature in accordance with reality appeared strange alongside the conventional realistic literature that preceded it. Whereas metafiction is essentially anti-realist, Robison's Minimalist novel, while innovative, remains realist.

A quarter of a century after it first appeared, the Minimalism of the 1970s and 1980s appears not to have been just a passing fad in American literature. Scholarly articles on Carver's work continue to appear, and writers associated with the term 'Minimalism', such as Ann Beattie and Bobbie Ann Mason, continue to publish regularly and enjoy strong sales. Perhaps the most convincing sign of its vitality is Robison's development of her Minimalist methods in early short stories into a new novelistic form. *Why Did I Ever* was the winner of the *Los Angeles Times* 2001 Book Prize for Fiction, and a *New York Times* Notable Book, which facts suggest a measure of critical acceptance. The successes of Minimalism demonstrate that American

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<sup>433</sup> Mark Currie, *Metafiction* (London: Longman, 1995), p. 39.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>435</sup> Schneider, 'William H. Gass', p. 383.



fiction since 1960 has not been entirely dominated by stylistically flamboyant, gargantuan novels of epic scope. Minimalism represents a vital trend in fiction, as will be further demonstrated in the chapters to come on Lydia Davis and David Markson.

## CHAPTER 4: Robert Lax

Robert Lax's body of work is important to this thesis not only as an example of Minimalism, but also because, in its variance from the Minimalist approaches of other poets discussed so far in this thesis, it demonstrates the variety Minimalism can comprise. Most of the poets I have dealt with up to this point have been self-consciously aware of belonging to a particular poetic tradition, one that provided the foundation for their Minimalist practice. Lax, who was born in 1915, developed his Minimalist poetics relatively independently of that tradition, and his brand of Minimalism is accordingly different.<sup>436</sup> But this difference is not necessarily immediately apparent.

Take, for instance, the following poem, published in Lax's collection *New Poems* in 1962.

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<sup>436</sup> Aram Saroyan published Lax in his *Lines* magazine and Lax and Saroyan did write to one another, at least briefly—there are a few items of correspondence from Saroyan in the Lax Papers at Columbia University. Lax's close friend Thomas Merton also published Louis Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker in his little magazine *Monks Pond*. It seems likely that Lax would have read their work there if not in *Lines*.

1234  
123

At first glance, this poem looks remarkably similar to Robert Grenier's 'BACH FIVE', which was discussed in Chapter 2. 'BACH FIVE' begins with a line that reads:

1      2      3      4      5

Like Lax's, Grenier's poem is composed mostly of numbers, but also includes '&', a figure not uncommon in Lax's poetry. But in places Grenier substitutes a word for the number or symbol, 'one' for '1', and 'and' for '&'. The point of these replacements, as I argued in Chapter 2, is to highlight the written aspect of the signs, their materiality as marks made on paper. In Lax's case, what is important is not what is actually on the page, but is the pattern that underlies what we see there. Lax uses the contrast between elements and their arrangement to gesture toward or instantiate an abstract pattern, whereas Grenier's concern is with the concrete.

Lax can also be contrasted with other poets discussed in this thesis. David Miller says that 'Lax is a strongly reductive poet who pares his poetic statements and his poetic/musical line down to the bare bones, to the essence; but he is the opposite of minimal poets like Aram Saroyan'.<sup>437</sup> What Miller is getting at here is similar to my point about Grenier. Saroyan placed great importance on the appearance of the poem on the page, on its status as marks made on paper. He was also concerned with the sound of poems, and not just as sound *patterns*, but as actual sounds. For Lax, the aspects of the poem that can be apprehended by the senses are only means by which something beyond them can be comprehended by the mind.

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<sup>437</sup> David Miller, 'The Poetry of Robert Lax: An Introduction', *New Lugano Review*, no. 2 (1975), p. 46.

One theme I have been tracing through this thesis is the role of realism as a motivating factor for a reductive literary practice. For the most part, the writers I have discussed have been concerned to make literature and literary language conform more closely to empirical reality, to the world as they experience it. Lax's Minimalism is based on a very different kind of realism. Lax's Minimalist practice is designed to reveal patterns, rather than to emphasise the materiality of language, as other writers in this thesis so far have done. Lax is no less a realist, but his conception of the real is something else altogether. His method is reduction, but his goal is different, as is the conception of reality that informs his poetic practice. Lax's religious beliefs inform his view of the real. For him, that which is most real is also abstract and divine. As he explained, 'the greatest abstraction refers precisely to the highest (and simplest) meaning of the highest (and simplest being)'.<sup>438</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that which is described as 'abstract' is 'withdrawn or separated from matter, from material embodiment, or from particular examples'. Thus, Lax's remarks suggest, God is separate from the material world in any particular way. But God is the ultimate Real. Lax's efforts to make his poetry accord with the real therefore involve an approach different from that of Saroyan and Grenier (to name two).

I will be using the term 'abstract' frequently in this chapter, and therefore I should clarify other relevant meanings of the word in its various forms. Lax's poetry can be called abstract in one sense because he attempts to find a way of expressing or representing abstract reality in it. The *OED* defines 'abstract' in the verb form as 'to withdraw, deduct, remove, or take away (something)', 'to draw off or apart; to separate', or 'to separate in mental conception; to consider apart from the material embodiment, or from particular instances'. 'Abstraction' is 'the act or process of

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<sup>438</sup> Lax, '(notes for comment)' notes for a commentary to accompany a recording of Lax's work for the Library of Congress made in Athens, Greece on 18 November 1965, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

separating in thought, of considering a thing independently of its associations; or a substance independently of its attributes; or an attribute independently of the substance to which it belongs'. To abstract in this way is one of Lax's methods of poetic reduction, as I hope to eventually make clear.

Lax's religious beliefs were not the only influence on his abstract Minimalist poetry. Like a number of other Minimalist writers, Lax was influenced by the visual arts. 'Abstract' is commonly used to describe certain types of visual art, but as Harold Osborne points out, 'in the language of twentieth-century art two different meanings of "abstract" have become firmly established'.

One of these—when we say, for example, that a picture of a certain object or scene is abstract rather than naturalistic—is on all fours with the uses of 'abstract' in other contexts. The other—as when we describe a picture as 'abstract' because it is not a picture *of* anything at all—has little or nothing in common with the former usage and is, linguistically, far more arbitrary.<sup>439</sup>

Osborne goes on to note that

In practice the differentiation between the two types of abstract art is by no means so clear-cut. Progressive abstraction from natural appearances may proceed indefinitely until at the extreme limit the subject of the picture is no longer recognizable and even the fact that the picture *has* semantic reference may not be detectable by visual inspection alone.<sup>440</sup>

The tension between these two types of abstraction will be relevant to my discussion of Lax's poetic practice.

Lax's work was profoundly influenced by the work and theories of his friend, the painter Ad Reinhardt. Reinhardt's painting was abstract in Osborne's second sense, in that it does not purport to represent anything. In fact, Reinhardt insisted on a strict separation between art and life. Reinhardt's theories, his practice, and his hard-line advocacy of abstraction in art played an important role in the development of

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<sup>439</sup> Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 25.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Lax's Minimalist poetry. Reinhardt's ideas did not, however, serve as an unproblematic source for Lax's poetic practice. The painter's theories did have a lasting impact on his work, but Lax accepted some of them only with difficulty. He struggled to adapt Reinhardt's artistic dogma to his work in his own chosen art form, and he sometimes found it hard to reconcile his friend's ideas with his own.

This struggle can already be seen in an early Lax poem first published in the *New Yorker* in 1942. 'The Man with the Big General Notions'<sup>441</sup> is a fable that mocks the man in the title's abstract ideas. This man is 'accounted very wise'. He tries to build a house, but asks, 'Why get brick when all you want is HARDNESS?' and makes a pile of various hard things. Next he asks, 'Why should I get cement when all that I need is STICKINESS?', and he attempts to hold the materials of his house together with various sticky substances, without regard for their actual, specific qualities as existing, material things. As long as they fall into the general category of sticky things, he thinks they will do the job. This man's lack of practicality and disregard for the concrete actuality of the things he uses in favour of his tendency to view them abstractly is ultimately his downfall—or at least that of his house. It eventually tumbles down about him. 'Some man // Some house', the poem ends.

'The Man with the Big General Notions' may have been directed at Reinhardt's dogmatic insistence on abstraction as the only true mode of art. Yet, as the result of Lax's Minimalist practice, his poetry approaches, and sometimes crosses over, the limit at which it becomes difficult to distinguish the abstract from the concrete. Although Lax's work appeared in anthologies of Concrete poetry, and he was described in 1968 as 'a concrete poet of international fame',<sup>442</sup> he is more

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<sup>441</sup> Robert Lax, 'The Man with the Big General Notions', *Love Had a Compass: Journals and Poetry*, ed. James J. Uebbing (New York: Grove, 1996), pp. 35-37.

<sup>442</sup> Robert E. Daggy, ed., *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine* (University Press of Kentucky, 1989), p. 347. I will give a brief account of Concrete poetry later in this chapter.

properly characterised as an abstract Minimalist because his poetry is motivated by an interest in abstract patterns and in underlying principles rather than in the material aspects of language.

The title of Nicolas Humbert and Werner Penzel's 1999 'Chamber Film' about Lax, 'Why Should I Buy a Bed When All I Want Is Sleep?', is taken from a line in 'The Man with the Big General Notions'. Humbert and Penzel also made a video installation about Lax in 1999, called *Three Windows*. It was co-produced by Kunsthaus Zürich, Haus der Kunst München, P3Art and Environment Tokyo, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art Helsinki, and Bavarian Radio. Lax's Journeyman Press books and films made of Lax's work by Emil Antonucci were the subject of a show at the Zona Gallery in Florence, Italy in 1979. An exhibition of his work alongside that of Reinhardt was held at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in 1985. A reading in celebration of Lax's eightieth birthday was staged in Zurich, the home of Pendo Verlag, one of Lax's publishers. A performance of his *Black/White Oratorio* was staged at the Festival de la Bâtie in Geneva in 1997, attended by a 'triumphant full house', probably because the audience remembered his appearance at the festival six years previously, when he read 'before an utterly enchanted audience'.<sup>443</sup> Intermedium Records in Germany put out a compilation called *wake up. Re: lax*, in which a number of experimental musicians used remixes of recordings of Lax reading his work to make music. The result was broadcast on Bayerischer Rundfunk in November 2003. Small presses, including but by no means limited to Antonucci's Journeyman Press, Stride in Exeter, and Furthermore in Vermont, have demonstrated a commitment to bringing his work into print. Lax did not achieve commercial success (nor did he appear to aspire to it), but he did attain some renown among those interested in

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<sup>443</sup> Vincent Barras, 'The First Production of *Black/White Oratorio*', and 'Two Meetings with Robert Lax', both in *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, eds. David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg (Exeter: Stride, 1999), pp. 226, 221.

experimental arts. These facts are some of those that can be offered as evidence for a certain kind of 'international fame' of this American poet who produced a distinctive body of work before his death in September 2000.

Much of Lax's work is instantly identifiable as his own. It features starkly reduced lines that give it the appearance of verticality, a severely restricted vocabulary and rhythmic repetition, and it resembles that of no one else. As David Miller put it in 1975, long before Lax's literary production ended, 'Lax is a poet whose discoveries are entirely his own and not drawn from the books of other poets; he has been from the beginning an extremely original, an unprecedented innovator'.<sup>444</sup> Lax persisted in his uniqueness through the nineties, but he remains relatively unknown in his native country.

The economics of printing bear some of the blame for the fact that Lax is not more widely read in America. Some of his poems, while Minimalist in nature, require a great deal of paper for their proper presentation. The proportion of text to white space is exceedingly small, and editors have expressed reluctance to publish him for this very reason. His characteristic vertical style is at odds with the demands of the publishing business. 'If you have any short poems which are more "horizontal" than the one you sent me last year', wrote James Laughlin to Lax on New Directions stationery in 1969, 'I'd love to have a look, for I've always wanted to see you in the Annual one year. But we do have this terrible space problem now, which cuts down badly on certain types of poems'.<sup>445</sup> A few years later Laughlin reiterated his interest and again stressed the issue of spatial constraint: 'do let me see some of your journal or any *short* poems'.<sup>446</sup> James Fitzsimmons of the *Lugano Review*, who in 1965 did publish Lax's 'Sea & Sky', a Minimalist poem extending to 117 pages, also expressed

<sup>444</sup> Miller, 'The Poetry of Robert Lax', p. 46.

<sup>445</sup> James Laughlin, letter to Robert Lax, 2 July 1969, Papers of Robert Lax, Columbia University.

<sup>446</sup> Laughlin, postcard to Lax, 23 December 1973, Lax Papers, Columbia. Emphasis in original.



concern that it would too expensive to publish some of Lax's poems as they should be presented.<sup>447</sup>

Many of Lax's poems contain only one, two, or three words, and first-time readers may find this stark simplicity baffling or even off-putting. These poems run the risk of provoking the response not unknown to Minimalist artists working in various media, that the artwork has too little 'work' in it, that it is 'not-art-enough', or was so easy to produce that it could have been done by anyone without much effort.<sup>448</sup> Claims that Lax's 'preferred method of production' is 'automatic' writing and the characterisation of his attitude as one of 'confident negligence with regard to the publication of his work'—'which poems should be printed and where and how'—do nothing to dispel such erroneous assessments of his work as carelessly conceived and constructed.<sup>449</sup> As Lax himself noted, 'it is hard to write a simple poem. ... it is hard to write a poem that is not simply, simply a poor reflection of many other(s) poems'.<sup>450</sup>

E. E. Cummings's isolation of verbal elements and arrangement of words and letters on the page suggested the possibilities of a vertical style to Lax early on,<sup>451</sup> and 'as early as 1934', he said, Lax 'began writing "vertical" poems with "one word to a line"'.<sup>452</sup> In 1934 Lax entered Columbia University, where Reinhardt, with whom he had attended high school in Long Island, was already a student. Lax established other

<sup>447</sup> James Fitzsimmons, postcard to Robert Lax, n.d., Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>448</sup> See Richard Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, p. 395, and James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (Yale University Press, 2001), p. 81.

<sup>449</sup> Gerhard van den Bergh, 'On Robert Lax', in Lax and Bergh, *On and By Robert Lax: Essay, Poetry, Drawings, Bibliography* (Zurich: Pendo Verlag, 1995), p. 38.

<sup>450</sup> Lax, '(notes for comment)' notes for a commentary to accompanying a recording of Lax's work for the Library of Congress made in Athens, Greece on 18 November 1965, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>451</sup> Letter from Lax to Robert Garlitz, 22 April 1997, quoted by Garlitz in 'Archival Visits with Robert Lax', in Robert Garlitz, Nicholas Zurbrugg, Robert Lax, Rupert Loydell, *Speaking Into Silence* (Exeter: Stride, 2001), p. 25, and Nicholas Zurbrugg, 'Interview with Robert Lax', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 27.

<sup>452</sup> Solt, quoting correspondence from Lax, in 'A World Look', p. 50.

important relationships during his years at Columbia. Mark Van Doren, his English professor, would remain a devoted friend and correspondent until his death. One of Lax's closest friends was Thomas Merton, whom he met at Columbia.

Merton, who later entered a monastery and gained fame as the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in which Lax features prominently, became a Roman Catholic in the late 1930s, and Lax followed suit, converting from Judaism in 1943. This was not a rejection of his heritage. 'I've never felt that I left my Jewish beginnings', Lax said. Instead, 'I simply flowered into a Christian'.<sup>453</sup> Interest in Eastern religious traditions was one Lax shared with both Merton and Reinhardt, and concepts such as Zen informed their ways of life, thought, and art.

It was perhaps during the 1940s, when Lax was working for the *New Yorker* and writing film reviews for *Time* magazine, that Reinhardt introduced Lax to the New York art scene. Sometime 'after college' he and Reinhardt often went to meetings of the New York Artist's Club and to art exhibits where Lax came into contact with Abstract Expressionist painters.<sup>454</sup>

In 1949, Lax travelled with the Cristiani Family Circus, sometimes appearing as a clown. This experience provided the inspiration for what was to evolve into his book of poetry *The Circus of the Sun*. Although he began work on a prose version of the book that same year, *The Circus of the Sun* was not published until 1959. In fact, it did not even exist in its final form until shortly before then. On 23 April 1958, Lax wrote to Thomas Merton that Emil Antonucci wanted to publish 'the long abandoned circus book'. Antonucci had already published chapbooks of Lax's work, beginning with *Tree* in 1955. The association between the two men was to be a long one.

Antonucci not only published, but designed and provided drawings for a number of

<sup>453</sup> Rosemary Daly, 'My Work is a Song', *Olean Times Herald*, Saturday 6 October 1990. Photocopy in Lax Papers at Columbia University, no page numbers available.

<sup>454</sup> Zurbrugg, 'Interview', p. 28.

Lax publications through the 1970s, and even made films based on Lax's work. But 'the problem' with the circus book, Lax told Merton in 1958, 'is that there is no circus book'.<sup>455</sup>

Nevertheless, Lax managed to make of the material a beautiful book of poetry and prose. Among its admirers he counted Stuart Gilbert, Denise Levertov, E.E. Cummings, and Marianne Moore.<sup>456</sup> As Susan Howe has remarked, *Circus* is Lax's 'least abstract book', and although Reinhardt 'preferred the more abstract ones, he was fond of *The Circus of the Sun* ... [and] even considered illustrating it'.<sup>457</sup> The time when Lax was adapting the book for publication, the late 1950s, was a transitional period for him, one in which he began moving progressively toward his hallmark abstract Minimalist style.

*Circus* is unusual in the context of Lax's *oeuvre*. It does not exhibit Lax's abstraction, nor his Minimalism, and none of the pieces are vertical in the typical Lax manner. But *Circus* does present themes that recur in his work. Because the subsequent treatment of these themes is more abstract and less explicit, *Circus* is worth a brief examination. Furthermore, this book demonstrates Lax's skill in composing in a more traditional manner, and thus provides evidence that his reasons for turning to his mature abstract Minimalist style did not include an inability to write in other ways.

*Circus* is a Christian book, and it was a fortuitous coincidence for Lax that the circus family he had travelled with in 1949 and about whom he wrote were named the Cristianis. In this book, the circus becomes a metaphor for the created world. A prose piece in the first few pages echoes or alludes to the creation in Genesis:

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<sup>455</sup> Lax, letter to Merton, 23 April 1958, in *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p. 147.

<sup>456</sup> Lax, 'A Detailed Account of His Career as a Writer', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 46.

<sup>457</sup> Susan Howe, 'The End of Art', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 86. Originally published in *Archives of American Art Journal*, 1974.

In the beginning (in the beginning of time to say the least) there were the compasses: whirling in void their feet traced out beginnings and endings, beginning and end in a single line. Wisdom danced also in circles for these were her kingdom: the sun spun, worlds whirled, the seasons came round, and all things went their rounds: but in the beginning, beginning and end were in one.<sup>458</sup>

Significant in these passages are the geometric shapes and the patterns that pre-exist the world and to some extent define its nature.

The Cristianis are presented in *Circus* as God's chosen people. In their performances they show themselves to be in tune with the underlying nature of creation. Mogador 'walks the earth like a turning ball: knowing / and rejoicing in his sense of balance'.

Beneath his feet the world is buoyant,  
thin and alive as a bounding rope.  
he stands on it poised,  
a gyroscope on the rim of a glass,  
sustained by the whirling of an inner wheel.

The performers exhibit grace and humility, but failure to remain humble leads to failure in performance. When Mogador tries to impress Penelope, the tightrope walker, and thinks of himself in grandiose terms, he suffers a series of falls. But when at last 'he didn't think anything', he succeeds in leaping and somersaulting through a hoop to land upright on a horse's back. What he has made is in effect a leap of faith, one that exhibits the negative receptivity characteristic of Lax's spiritual beliefs. 'It was nothing' is the last line of the poem.

Near the end of *Circus* appears a prose piece about an unnamed 'he' who seems to have served as an unobtrusive narrator. His observations of the circus and his relations with its people form the basis of the book. In the following passage, he is watching the packing up of the circus while waiting for Mogador:

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<sup>458</sup> Lax, *Circus of the Sun* (New York: Journeyman, 1960). All subsequent quotations are from this unpaginated edition.

He began to whistle a tune from the depths of his soul; he had never heard it before but he recognized it as a form of the song his soul had always been singing, a song he had been singing since the beginning of the world, a song of return. It was as though he stood in a dark corner of the universe and whistled softly, between his teeth, and the far stars were attentive, as though he whistled and waves far off could hear him, as though he had discovered a strain at least of the night song of the world.

Like the Cristianis, 'he' seems to have acquired an ability to relate to something profound, something located deep at the heart of the nature of things, something that courses through the entire world as well as his own soul. It is significant that Lax chooses song in this poem as his metaphor for the underlying connection between all things. The same notion is found in *Tree*, the first Lax poem to be published by Antonucci, four years before *Circus*.

The (mostly) one-word lines of *Tree* show Lax's characteristic vertical style, from which *Circus* differs. The repetition that would later become a prominent feature of his work is also present in places:

no  
single  
singer  
in  
a  
silent  
city

but  
in  
singing  
city  
singing

singer  
sings  
his  
song  
in  
singing

song  
so

singularly  
sung<sup>459</sup>

The permutational aspects of this passage are not characteristic of the poem as a whole, but permutation was later to become one of Lax's favoured poetic methods. In its celebration of a community and of nature, and the connections between the citizens of the city, the tree, and the 'bird / who / moves / among / the / branches // deep / in the / green // singing', this is a psalm, a song of praise. The notion of poetry as such is crucial to Lax's poetics.

Lax's idea of poetry as song comes up in connection with Jack Kerouac. Apparently Lax knew Kerouac, and recommended that he visit Merton in 1961, when Kerouac was, as Lax put it, 'much afloat in a great big bathysphere of vino' and producing no writing. Kerouac misinterpreted Lax's advice, thinking he was suggesting joining the monastery.<sup>460</sup> Earlier, meditation on Kerouac's writing had provided the occasion for Lax to sort out his ideas on the relationship between music and literature in a way that is deeply relevant to Lax's own work. Though Kerouac is rumoured to have praised Lax as 'one of the great original voices of our times',<sup>461</sup> Lax didn't think that Kerouac and the Beats had produced much of quality. He did consider the efforts of both Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg beneficial for opening literature up so that previously silent (or ignored) voices could be heard.<sup>462</sup> But his ideas about what literature should be, and how one should proceed as a writer, differed from Kerouac's.

<sup>459</sup> Lax, *Tree* (New York: Journeyman Press, 1955), n.p.

<sup>460</sup> Lax, letter to Merton, n.d. [1961], *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, p. 220.

<sup>461</sup> This statement is quoted numerous times, on book jackets, on websites, and in advertisements for Lax's books, but I never seen a source given for it. See, for example, 'A Hermitage in Patmos: On the Life and Times of Robert Lax', *Poetry Bay Online Magazine*, Winter 2003, <http://www.poetrybay.com/winter2003/dreamcatcher.html>. Also the Overlook Press's site entry on Lax's *Circus Days and Nights*, <http://www.overlookpress.com/fiction/circus.htm>. Both accessed 12 October 2004.

<sup>462</sup> 'Acy-Ducey' Notebook, 22 March 1959, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

‘Cherubim & Palm-Trees (for Jean-Louis Kerouac)’, 22 March 1958, is an unpublished piece that serves both as advice to Kerouac and as an aesthetic statement. In it, Lax urges Kerouac to take seriously his claim to be a ‘jazz writer’. Lax makes a distinction in this piece between words in their ordinary usage and words used in a special, poetic, way:

words played  
like music  
have meaning  
as words,  
like words  
and music,  
but not the same  
meaning,  
and not  
the same value  
as words just used  
like words.

words played like  
music  
are poetic words;  
words played like  
music  
are themselves  
a kind of  
music.<sup>463</sup>

In effect, Lax claims here that musicality is what sets poetry apart from other kinds of language use. Musicality when combined with words changes both the meaning and the value of those words. Words in poetry do have meaning, but that meaning is altered or supplemented by their participation in a musical, poetic construction.

It should be noted that this text is not particularly musical. ‘Cherubim and Palm Trees’ looks like a poem because the text is broken up into lines. But the piece is not essentially musical, and therefore according to Lax’s ideas about poetry, including those expressed in ‘Cherubim’, is not poetry. It seems important to make

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

this distinction, although it is difficult to do so with much of Lax's writing. Such ideas were still developing for Lax at this time, and much of Lax's writing of every kind has this sort of look and is broken up into lines. As will become clear, for Lax, poems are patterned structures featuring rhythm and repetition.

The emphases Lax places in 'Cherubim and Palm Trees' on the musical nature of poetry and the idea of the poem as song are recurring ones. These themes are also religious: Lax's poems are songs of praise or psalms that serve as attempts to connect with the divine. To get the song right, to find the universal or essential element in it, is to come closer to God. As I quoted Warren Motte saying in the introduction to this thesis, Minimalists believe that there is a heart, core, or essence to things, and Lax is no exception. These ideas can be seen in the following lines about Louis Armstrong:

there was something  
prophetic  
about his  
trumpeting:  
to be that right  
is to be at one  
with the source of all good things<sup>464</sup>

Another writer who interested Lax was Samuel Beckett. Lax appreciated Beckett's journeys to the region 'down there in deep sleep ... where all of us live', and admired his expertise in 'bringing back a living report'. For this purpose, said Lax, 'one needs a specially made, specially trimmed vocabulary'.<sup>465</sup> So Lax saw Beckett's work as sharing in the spirit of eliminating and reducing in order to get to the essential. He also noticed the permutational aspect of Beckett's writing: 'beckett proceeds from sentence [to sentence], story to story, dream to dream with a mad methodology, always explaining his transitions (his work is a series of transitions)

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<sup>464</sup> Untitled typescript, 6 December 1959, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>465</sup> Lax, 'Beckett and *Deep Sleep*', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 7:2 (1987), p. 34.



always adjusting and readjusting his sentences in full view of the reader'.<sup>466</sup> Beckett himself, on first seeing something written by Lax, enthusiastically remarked 'He's good, isn't he', and inscribed a book to Lax 'his way', vertically.<sup>467</sup>

In the autumn of 1960, Lax compared the work of Beckett, Kerouac, and J. D. Salinger. While reading Salinger the summer before he had experimented in his notebook-journal with an 'automatic', flowing prose style that might also have been modelled after Kerouac (though he said that Henry Miller was responsible for his first attempts at 'fast writing').<sup>468</sup> After about a month he lapsed without comment back into his typical sparse verticality.<sup>469</sup> Lax's notes give a hint why: 'of the three writers the most stylized, and perhaps the most successful in saying what he means, is beckett'. He concludes that 'there is more to be learned from beckett's patient (and spare) inventiveness even than from kerouac's (short-lived) spontaneity, or from salinger's careful and mellow (prosodizing)'.<sup>470</sup> Lax has made a decision in favour of sparseness and inventiveness over expansive spontaneity.

Lax was an admirer of classical literature, listing Homer as among his favourite authors and saying that he admired 'the ancient writers for the weight of their words, the simplicity and strength of their expressions'.<sup>471</sup> Simplicity of expression is clearly a literary value for Lax. There are several unpublished versions of writings about Oedipus in the Lax papers at Columbia University.<sup>472</sup> One from July

<sup>466</sup> Untitled notes, 15 November 1960, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>467</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Zurbrugg, 'Working Across the Media: Eugen Gomringer and Robert Lax', in *Robert Lax, Eugen Gomringer: Editions Francesco Conz: Prints on Fabric*, Catalogue for an Exhibition at De Monfort University, 31 October-30 November 1996, n.p.

<sup>468</sup> Zurbrugg, 'Interview', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 29.

<sup>469</sup> 'Acey-Ducey' Notebook, Summer 1959.

<sup>470</sup> Untitled notes, 15 November 1960, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>471</sup> Lax, 'writing career', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 54.

<sup>472</sup> These include 'The Invocation', a long permutational poem with the lines 'Terrible systems of man in nature / Terrible systems of nature in man / Terror in man / Terror in nature / Natural function of tragedy'. The poem is in Notebook H, in a box in which Notebooks E, F, and G contain the various parts of *Number, Weight, and Measure*. Since the date given for the portions of *Number, Weight, and*

1959 is shortly followed by notes making clear just how important simplicity was to him:

right is (usually) simplest  
 wrong is the most complex  
 right is straightforward  
 wrong devious  
 [...]
   
 this applies not only to the morally right  
 but artistically right  
 and technically<sup>473</sup>

There is a religious as well as moral and artistic end to simplification, expressed elsewhere by Lax in terms of David's statement that 'the words of the Lord are pure words: refined seven times'. Such refinement is akin to a process of abstraction in which that which is not pure or essential is removed or deducted or separated out. 'This refinement can be to no other purpose but ultimately to the Lord's', Lax continues, 'for we do not refine to achieve a base metal but only to attain pure gold'.<sup>474</sup>

As I have said, the late 1950s were crucial, transitional years for Lax as a poet. He was in New York at the time, and his letters to Thomas Merton indicate that he was in close contact with Reinhardt. In 1959, Lax and Reinhardt visited Merton at the Gethsemani monastery in Kentucky. According to Richard Kostelanetz, Lax 'sought linguistic purity comparable to the visual purity of [Reinhardt] and the spiritual purity of [Merton]'.<sup>475</sup> But the divisions are not so neat. Lax recognised the spiritual element of Reinhardt's doctrines. Reinhardt exhibited a keen interest in a variety of spiritual traditions, and acknowledged the validity of 'making a religious analogy' to his

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*Measure* published in the 1985 edition of *New Poems* is 1967, it is possible that *The Invocation* dates from about the same time.

<sup>473</sup> 'Acey-Ducey' Notebook, 30 July 1959.

<sup>474</sup> Lax, 'writing career', p. 55.

<sup>475</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, 'Lax, Robert', *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: A Capella Books, 1993).

artistic process.<sup>476</sup> Though years earlier Reinhardt had attempted to talk Merton out of entering the Catholic Church, in 1957 he presented Merton with a small version of one of his later black paintings, with the understanding that Merton intended to use it for meditative and latreutic purposes. Reinhardt's influence, that is to say, was not at odds with Lax's religious inclinations, but it did affect the way in which those appeared in his poetry.

*The Circus of the Sun* was put together in its final form during the transitional period of the late 1950s, but it represents an earlier mode for Lax. He remarked that at the end of the book, 'everything, the whole circus disappears (as they always do) & with it disappeared my interest in such a wide variety of images'. 'From this point on', Lax says, he began 'to concentrate on one image, or a few very simple ones, or still later, [...] on no image'. 'The end of the circus' was for Lax 'the beginning of a more abstract' style of writing.<sup>477</sup> Lax's gradual turn away from images indicates that he became increasingly less interested in representing that which can be apprehended by the senses.

This more abstract style of writing was certainly influenced by Reinhardt. By the late 1950s, the crucial transitional period for Lax, abstraction had long been Reinhardt's mode. Reinhardt rejected the idea of 'images' in art altogether. Of an exhibition of his work in 1944 he said. 'The paintings in my show are not pictures. ... The intellectual and emotional content are in what the lines, colors, and spaces do'.<sup>478</sup> Reinhardt 'made clear his opposition to *any* subject matter. His position was that there is no such thing as good painting about something'.<sup>479</sup> According to art historian Barbara Rose, he was 'the only member of the first generation to start as an abstract

<sup>476</sup> Naomi Vine, 'Mandala and Cross', *Art in America*, November 1991, pp. 124-133; p. 126.

<sup>477</sup> Lax, '(notes for comment)', Notes for the commentary accompanying Lax's reading of his poems for a Library of Congress recording made in Athens, Greece in 1965. Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>478</sup> Quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), p. 39.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

artist in the thirties and never deviate from abstraction'.<sup>480</sup> Reinhardt is most famous for his 'black' paintings, which carry abstraction to its ultimate extreme. He had gradually moved toward producing the black paintings exclusively, and this process, as well as his theorising, quickened in the late 1950s. According to Lucy Lippard, 'toward 1959 Reinhardt's writings tightened up into the art-as-art dogmas, complementing the paintings' restriction to black five-foot squares'.<sup>481</sup>

Reinhardt was associated with the Abstract Expressionist painters, both personally and professionally, particularly Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.<sup>482</sup> The younger Minimalist artists of the 1960s positioned themselves against Abstract Expressionism, and particularly its egotism and its basis in the artist's emotional life.<sup>483</sup> Despite his connections with the Abstract Expressionists, Reinhardt provided a model of a different approach to art, and his influence on the Minimalists was an important one. Richard Wollheim's article 'Minimal Art', from which the use of the term Minimalism in art is said to have derived, refers to Reinhardt's work as one of its prime examples of the mode.<sup>484</sup> Reinhart 'anticipated the Minimalist program more than any artist of his generation'.<sup>485</sup>

Kenneth Baker defines Minimalist art as

primarily sculpture or three-dimensional work made after 1960, that is abstract—or even more inert visually than “abstract” suggests—and barren of merely decorative detail, in which geometry is emphasized and expressive technique avoided.<sup>486</sup>

<sup>480</sup> Barbara Rose, 'Introduction', *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Viking, 1975), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>481</sup> Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 120.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.

<sup>483</sup> According to Lynn Zelevansky, Sol LeWitt stressed the importance of Reinhardt's polemical writings, saying that Reinhardt provided the only serious challenge to the 'emotional excesses' of Abstract Expressionism. 'Ad Reinhardt and the Younger Artists of the 1960s', in John Elderfield, ed., *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>484</sup> Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', in Battcock, ed., pp. 387-399.

<sup>485</sup> Zelevansky, p. 18.

<sup>486</sup> Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), p. 9.

Given such a definition, the relevance of Reinhardt to Minimalism seems clear. But there were also more specific connections between Reinhardt and the younger Minimalists. For example, he taught Robert Morris art history at Hunter College.<sup>487</sup> Carl Andre acknowledged the older painter's impact on his practice.<sup>488</sup> Sol LeWitt saw Reinhardt as '*the* important figure of the time', and the ubiquitous squares in his work may have derived from Reinhardt's use of the square format and the cruciform pattern of his paintings.<sup>489</sup> The lack of representation in Minimalist art is certainly in accordance with Reinhardt's views regarding subject matter in art, and this is reflected in the Minimalists' tendency to use generic titles or no titles at all. Reinhardt himself favoured 'Abstract Painting' as the label for most of his later work.

There are crucial differences between Reinhardt and the Minimalists. Whereas Reinhardt was exclusively concerned with painting, Minimalist art tended to be three-dimensional. Reinhardt's insistence on the separation between art and life was aimed at life as the content of or motivation for art. Instead he advocated art for its own sake, art derived only from art itself. But for the Minimalists, there was a connection between art and life, albeit of a different nature. The status of art objects as things in the world that take their place alongside other things was a governing notion of much Minimalist art. Robert Morris, for example, rejected painting, Reinhardt's chosen medium, because he saw it as illusionistic in essence, whereas sculpture is physical and functions 'concretely and literally' in the same space occupied by the viewer.<sup>490</sup>

Abstraction for Reinhardt involves a process of reduction that allies itself with both negativity and singularity. In a conversation that must have been an infuriating one for the interviewer, Reinhardt repeatedly answers questions in negative terms.

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<sup>487</sup> Meyer, p. 39.

<sup>488</sup> Lippard, p. 193.

<sup>489</sup> Zelevansky, p. 19.

<sup>490</sup> Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture', in Battcock, ed., pp. 223, 225.

When asked why, he says that the painting itself 'is a negative thing'. Art history has, in Reinhardt's view, amounted to 'a negative progression',<sup>491</sup> a shearing away of the unnecessary. Reduction is also prominent in Reinhardt's insistence on the singular. His statement of dogma, 'Art-as-Art', consists of seventeen paragraphs, each beginning with the words 'the one' (for example, 'the one thing to say about art', 'the one idea of art', 'the one object of fifty years of art'). Reinhardt frequently posed his dogmatic writings in negative terms. His 'Abstract Art Refuses' consists primarily of a list of phrases beginning with 'no', and ending with 'no reality-reducing, no life-mirroring, no abstracting from anything, no nonsense, no involvements, no confusing painting with everything that is not painting'.<sup>492</sup> Reinhardt's refusals suggest that he was interested in creating the sort of painting that did not represent anything at all. That is, his paintings had no representational basis in 'life', in the material world of experience. Reinhardt's critical writings also exemplify the repetition in his work, which is evident in the way his black paintings, on canvases of equal size, were displayed in evenly spaced intervals along gallery walls.<sup>493</sup>

As I have said, Reinhardt was an important influence on Lax's poetry. In a 1985 interview, Lax reflected on this topic:

I think that conversations with Reinhardt, and his directions in painting, certainly had an influence on my writing. Sometimes not specifically, but the general direction that he was working in certainly did—towards reducing the number of colours, reducing the form, and repeating the theme.<sup>494</sup>

The full impact of Reinhardt's ideas on Lax's poetry would take some time to develop.

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<sup>491</sup> Bruce Glaser, 'An Interview with Ad Reinhardt', in Rose, ed., *Art-as-Art*, pp. 14, 17.

<sup>492</sup> Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>493</sup> Based on photo of Reinhardt exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, 1966, in Rose, ed., *Art-as-Art*, p. 42.

<sup>494</sup> Zurbrugg, 'Interview', p. 28.

The transition to a new style was not altogether smooth. One can see Lax struggling to reconcile ideas like those espoused by Reinhardt with modes of art and poetry that are more representational in 'Problem in Design', which was written in 1958, when Lax was in the process of shifting to his new style:

what if  
you like  
to draw  
big flowers,

but what  
if some  
sage has  
told you  
that  
there is  
nothing  
more beautiful

nothing  
more  
beautiful

than a  
straight  
line  
?

what should  
you draw:  
big flowers?  
straight lines?

i think  
you should  
draw

big  
flow  
ers

big  
flow  
ers

big  
flow

ers

big  
flow  
ers

big  
flow  
ers

big  
flow  
ers

big  
flow  
ers

big  
flow  
ers

un  
til

they  
be  
co  
me

a  
str  
ai  
gh  
t

l  
i  
n  
e<sup>495</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that the ‘sage’ is Reinhardt. Lax breaks up the word  
‘flowers’ into syllables, and then reduces them even more, making the poem represent

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<sup>495</sup> Lax, ‘Problem in Design’, *Love Had a Compass: Journals and Poetry*, ed. James J. Uebbing (New York: Grove, 1996), pp. 40-41.



visually the straight line the flowers are to become.<sup>496</sup> A layout on the page like this makes the poem concrete by focusing attention on the visual or material aspect of the words, ironically so, since it in effect advocates abstraction rather than emphasising the material. The insistent repetition of 'big / flow / wers' shows rhythm gaining prominence in Lax's poetry. This rhythm is based on reducing the lines to individual syllables. The last part of the poem breaks the words down so far that some lines do not contain recognizable units of sound, although the individual letters themselves can be voiced.

I discovered a related, unpublished poem in the Lax Papers at Columbia in a large notebook with material from 1960 and 1961, including work that was to be published in *New Poems*:

i draw  
straight  
lines,  
said  
the young  
man,  
and think  
they are  
perfectly  
beautiful;  
but what  
can I  
draw now?

straight  
lines,  
i said  
straight  
lines,  
straight  
lines  
until  
they  
disappear

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<sup>496</sup> There may also be an echo here from *Circus of the Sun*, in which there was mention of 'beginning and end in a single line'. See above.

This poem suggests that Lax's aesthetic moved even further at this time toward abstraction and Reinhardt's doctrine of negation.<sup>497</sup> 'Big flowers' have been left behind, and the question now is how far one can follow the trajectory of the straight line. Note also the shift in perspective: In 'Problem in Design', there seems to be an individual speaker muddling over the question, and prefacing his conclusion with the somewhat tentative 'I think' [you should draw big flowers ...]. In the second poem, there is a dialogue, the first half of which appears to be contributed by the speaker of 'Problem in Design', but he has been relegated to the third person: his words here are reported. The response is much more positive this time: there is an unequivocal statement of what should be done. The 'I' in this poem has now adopted the role of the sage.

Formal reduction and repetition together with an abstract treatment of spiritual themes characterise the following Lax poem, written in 1960 and first published by John Ashbery in *Locus Solus* in 1962:

The port  
was longing

the port  
was longing

not for  
this ship

not for  
that ship

not for  
this ship

not for  
that ship

the port

---

<sup>497</sup> Lucy Lippard quotes Reinhardt as saying that he 'was attracted to the Zen paradox because it "goes over and over something until it disappears"'. *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 63.

was longing

the port  
was longing

not for  
this sea

not for  
that sea

not for  
this sea

not for  
that sea

the port  
was longing

the port  
was longing

not for  
this &

not for  
that

not for  
this &

not for  
that

the port  
was longing

the port  
was longing

not for  
this &

not for  
that<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Lax, 'the port was longing', *Love Had a Compass*, p. 9. Written in 1960. First published in *Locus Solus* 3-4 (1962).

'The Port Was Longing' is visually striking, and exemplifies Lax's vertical style. This and the three other Lax poems that accompany it are immediately distinguishable from the rest of the work in the 'Double Issue of New Poetry' of *Locus Solus* in which it appeared. Other poets in the issue included Ashbery himself, LeRoi Jones, Frank O'Hara, Diane Di Prima, James Merrill, Barbara Guest, Anselm Hollo, and Kenneth Koch. The lines of Lax's poems are markedly shorter than the others, and there is decidedly more white space on the pages on which they are printed. The insistent repetition also sets Lax's poems apart, as does the severely restricted number of words. Particularly noticeable is the complete absence of adjectives, and the lack of any definite descriptions. One might argue that the rhythmic musicality of the poem constitutes a direct appeal to the senses. But the theme indicates otherwise. In fact, this is in part what the poem is *about*: not 'this', not 'that', not concrete things that can be pointed to and apprehended by the senses, but something else entirely, perhaps something that can only be intuited.

Traditionally in religious poetry, the port represents the serenity and safety of heaven for which the storm-tossed soul on the seas of life longs. In Lax's poem, however, it is the port itself that does the longing. Perhaps the port could still be said to represent a sort of heavenly abode, and its longing could be a force that draws souls to it. But in the context of Lax's work, it more likely stands as a metaphor for spiritual desire.

The repetition of the phrase 'the port was longing' does not suggest, as the poem goes on to tell us, that the port is longing for something specific. Rather, 'longing' is its state of being. Something essential about its nature is being asserted here: the port *is* longing. It still functions as a religious poem, even though overt religious references have been dispensed with. The emphasis on a state of being, on

an essential nature, takes the poem far from any reference to a specific port, as does its lack of adjectives and identifying terms. It is, therefore, abstract. These abstract features, together with its terse lines and limited vocabulary also make it Minimalist in unit and style.

The distinctive verticality of Lax's poetry was to become even more prominent in a number of the *New Poems*: he seems there to have abandoned the 'big flowers' in favour of the 'straight line'. Lax chose the title *New Poems* in order to emphasise the stylistic difference of these new works. Even some of his closest friends were at first taken aback at the poems' starkness. 'I was surprised at the small thin lines running up and down the pages', wrote Merton, but he did praise the book, and conceded that 'there is much zen in this'.<sup>499</sup> Mark Van Doren must have expressed his initial reservations to Lax, and received instructions on how to get more out of them. 'I read your new poems aloud, several times, as directed, and they had power. But they would have more—for me—still more—if they had more different words in them, and therefore more (I think) thoughts'.<sup>500</sup>

There are certainly fewer words in *New Poems*, and the 'small thin lines' or the 'straight line' in poetry is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the series of one-word poems Lax wrote in 1960-1962, some of which appeared in *New Poems*. Consider, for example:

never  
never  
never  
never  
never  
never  
never  
never  
never

<sup>499</sup> Thomas Merton, letter to Lax, 22 January 1963, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, p. 244.

<sup>500</sup> Mark Van Doren, letter to Lax, 16 February 1963, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

never  
 never  
 never  
 never<sup>501</sup>

The form here is reduced to the utmost in simplicity, and the vocabulary is cut down to a single word, which is repeated. The poem is Minimalist in unit, style, form, and material. Negation dominates, by virtue of the particular word chosen. 'Never' is a straight line stretching into infinity, disappearing into nothingness. But it would be misleading to claim that 'negativity' is prominent as the *content* of Lax's poetry, unless it is in the immaterial nature of God, which cannot be described, as suggested in the works I mentioned above, and in Lax's remark, 'I think that by definition God is unknowable to us.'<sup>502</sup> Although 'stop' and 'death' constitute the vocabulary of other one-word poems, 'is', 'life', and 'go' receive the straight-line treatment as well.<sup>503</sup> But the negativity of a reductive method, which excludes various things from the poetry, is a relevant topic.

Lax's instructions to Van Doren to read the poems aloud reveals the natural rhythm he wanted to capture in the number of repetitions, a point Lax made again in an interview in 1985.<sup>504</sup> Reading the poems out loud helps to emphasise the rhythm. But Lax's poems should not be taken as 'sound poems' in the ordinary sense. As I hope to demonstrate, for Lax what is important are not the actual sounds produced, but the rhythmic pattern as an abstract entity. The actual sounds serve merely as a means of instantiating the pattern, of making it visible. Lax's reductions are designed to provide a glimpse of the formal or structural patterning that informs poetry. Forms

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<sup>501</sup> Lax, *New Poems* (New York: Journeyman, 1962), n.p.

<sup>502</sup> Peter France, 'A Hermit for Our Time: Robert Lax on Patmos', Chapter 8 of *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), p. 208.

<sup>503</sup> The 'stop' poem appears in the Lax papers at Columbia, in a notebook entitled *A Bower of Weeds*, dated December 1961 and January-February 1962. The others are published in *New Poems*, n.p.

<sup>504</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, 'Interview with Robert Lax, Patmos—13<sup>th</sup> January 1985', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, pp. 27-28.

or patterns may be more or less closely adhered to, but they cannot be said to exist in any physical or concrete sense. There may be sonnets, for example, there may be instances and representations of the sonnet form, but there is no one thing that can be pointed to as *the* sonnet form. The sonnet form is an abstract entity, and it is just such entities that interest Lax. Lax's radical reductions often function to make the abstract pattern behind a poem easier to discern.

We have seen how Lax reduces the line to a single word, and in some cases, to just a syllable. He often omits words, leaving it to the reader to construct whatever grammatical unit might be construed with what is given, and at times he dispenses with grammar altogether. Lax's concern with formal reduction is evident thematically in this poem:

forms  
forms  
forms  
  
basic  
basic  
forms  
  
basic  
basic  
basic  
basic  
basic  
basic  
forms<sup>505</sup>

Lax has also written poems that use reduction to 'basic forms' as a method to explore the meaning of what it is to be a poem. The following also appeared in *New Poems*:

AAA  
AAA  
AAAA  
AAA

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<sup>505</sup> Lax, *New Poems*, n.p.

AAA  
 AAA  
 AAAA  
 AAA

AAAA  
 AAAA  
 AAAA  
 AAA

AAA  
 AAA  
 AAAA  
 AAA

When asked about this and the ‘123’ poem I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Lax explained that they were inspired by

seeing what abstract painters can do with their work—and trying to find what the essence for me of a traditional poem is, and getting it down to that. [...] I wanted to see what it would be. And it’s something like this. I wanted to do it with the simplest elements.<sup>506</sup>

The essence of a traditional poem for Lax appears to be that it is a structured entity involving repetition, variation within regularity of line lengths and number of syllables, and formal patterning.

The particular structure of ‘AAA’ and ‘123’ is worth noting. Both poems exhibit a certain pattern based on the numbers three and four that recurs in various ways in Lax’s work, and they do so on the level of the stanza as a whole, as well as on the level of the lines within the stanzas.<sup>507</sup> On the larger scale, each poem comprises four stanzas, the first, second, and fourth of which are the same, while the third varies. The same pattern applies to the lines in the first, second, and third stanzas: one, two, and four are identical, and three is a variation.

<sup>506</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, ‘Aspiring to the Condition of Music’, Interview with Robert Lax, Luzern, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1989, in Garlitz, Zurbrugg, Lax, and Loydell, *Speaking Into Silence* (Exeter: Stride, 2001), p. 42.

<sup>507</sup> The numbers three and four also come up in Lax’s postcard poem ‘4 Boats, 3 People’ (Nottinghamshire: Tarasque, n.d.) and *3 or 4 Poems About the Sea* (New York: Journeyman, 1966).



Such patterning can also be seen in some of Lax's famous 'colour poems', and it is audible as well when read aloud, as in 'Abstract Poem'<sup>508</sup>:

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<sup>508</sup> From *33 Poems*, ed. Thomas Kellein (New York: New Directions, 1988), p. 137. First published in *Retort* 42:3 (1967).

red	red	black	red
red	red	black	red
black	black	blue	black
black	black		black
black	black	black	black
black	black	black	black
blue	blue	blue	blue

The title, 'Abstract Poem', echoes those of the numerous works by Reinhardt he called simply 'Abstract Painting'.<sup>509</sup> Written in 1965 and published in 1967, this poem has a structure like that of '123' and 'AAA', where there are four units, the first, second, and fourth of which are identical, and the third a variation. 'Homage to Reinhardt', published a year after the painter's death, has a similar structure:

black  
black  
black

blue  
blue  
blue

black  
black  
black  
black

blue  
blue  
blue<sup>510</sup>

The title refers us to the black paintings of Reinhardt, which, despite their blackness, had a cruciform pattern, and actually included subtle shadings of other colours, sometimes blue.

There may be a mystical significance to the combination of the numbers three and four in Lax's patterns. Certainly the number three is prominent in Christian theology and symbolism. In an article on the spiritual in Reinhardt's paintings, Naomi Vine points out that the painter may have had Jung's notion of 'the quaternity [a]s an archetype of almost universal occurrence' in mind when composing his black paintings. In addition, 'Reinhardt's notes on his work include

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<sup>509</sup> See the titles of Reinhardt's paintings in the catalogue for an exhibition of his work at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 13 April-2 June 1985: Gudrun Inboden and Thomas Kellein, *Ad Reinhardt* (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1985). The catalogue includes a poem by Lax that I will discuss later.

<sup>510</sup> Lax, 'For Ad Reinhardt', *Stereo Headphones* 1:1 (Spring, 1969). Originally published in *Voyages* 1:1 and 2 (1968).

numerous lists of ways to divide the universe into four parts'.<sup>511</sup> But a simpler, less esoteric explanation serves just as well.

Lax used repetition as in music, in order to establish a 'pattern to play against'.<sup>512</sup> A 'theme' is established by stating it once and then repeating it. Next there follows a variation, and finally a return to the initial pattern. The minimum number of units with which this can be accomplished, then, is four. These poems are Minimalist because they stick close to the bare minimum number of units required to be the type of thing they are, they make use of an extremely limited variety of units, and their representational aspect is severely curtailed. They are also abstract because what they do refer to is a pattern, something that doesn't exist in its own right, not in any physical or concrete sense, but must be 'drawn out' or 'read off' instantiations of it. At one point Lax composed a 'maxim' on this type of poetry: 'it doesn't matter if red is not red[;] what matters is, red is not blue'.<sup>513</sup> In other words, it is the contrast between the elements that is important. It is not what they represent, nor what are in themselves that is important. Instead it is the sheer difference between them that allows the poet to use them to suggest a pattern.

Lax's Minimalist abstraction can be so extreme that it threatens to cross the border into the realm of the concrete, and his work is often assumed to be concrete. In fact, the 'Abstract Poem' quoted above is included as one of 'Three Concrete Poems' in the 1996 volume *Love Had a Compass*.<sup>514</sup> By the mid-60s

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<sup>511</sup> Vine, 'Mandala and Cross', p. 128.

<sup>512</sup> William Packard, 'Interview with Robert Lax', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 24.

<sup>513</sup> From 'A Red and Blue Notebook', 4-8 October 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>514</sup> Lax, *Love Had a Compass: Journals and Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 17.

Lax's name had come to be associated with Concrete Poetry, and this association continued into the 1990s.<sup>515</sup>

Concrete poetry as a conscious movement arose in the 1950s, and by the 1960s was an established phenomenon in many countries. Some would argue that it has precursors in, for example, Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, and Ezra Pound's ideogrammatic method in the *Cantos*,<sup>516</sup> and pattern poems such as George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' are also forerunners. Major early practitioners and theorists of the form in the fifties were the Brazilian Noigandres group, consisting of Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Decio Pignatari, and the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer.

Reduction is a prominent feature of much Concrete poetry, and it places emphasis on the poem as an object, or the materials aspects of language. Anthologist Mary Ellen Solt points out that 'there is a fundamental requirement which the various kinds of concrete poetry meet: concentration upon the physical material from which the poem or text is made'. This material, says Solt, 'is language: words reduced to their elements of letters (to see) syllables (to hear)'.<sup>517</sup> Such reduction on the visual axis is exemplified by the work of Hansjörg Mayer, in the spirit of Kurt Schwitters's remark that 'not the word but the letter is the original material of poetry'.<sup>518</sup> In Mayer's *alphabet* poems (1962-63), one group of poems, multiple instances of a lowercase letter in a large, bold type with lines a

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<sup>515</sup> A poem by Lax was commissioned for an exhibition called 'Robert Lax and Concrete Poetry' at the University of Buffalo in 1990-1991. In 1996 an exhibition at DeMontfort University featured prints by Francesco Conz of work by Lax and Eugen Gomringer, who is regarded as one of the first Concrete poets.

<sup>516</sup> Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry' (1958), in Solt, ed., pp. 71-72.

<sup>517</sup> Mary Ellen Solt, 'A World Look at Concrete Poetry', in Solt, ed., *Concrete Poetry*, p. 7.

<sup>518</sup> Quoted in Guy Bennett, 'Concerning the Visual in Poetry'.

half inch thick about one another in an arrangement on the page.<sup>519</sup> These poems cannot be read aloud; they must be seen to be experienced. Another type of Concrete poetry emphasises the sonic aspect. These poems accomplish literally the reduction of language to elements to be heard, and the use of those elements as compositional material. Emmett Williams emphasizes that Concrete poets use 'the semantic, visual and phonetic elements of language as raw materials in a way seldom used by the poets of the past'.<sup>520</sup>

Ian Hamilton Finlay was probably the first to call Lax a Concrete poet. Finlay gave Lax's 'The Port Was Longing' pride of place on the cover of the 'Concrete Number' of his little magazine *Poor Old Tired Horse* in 1964. Finlay probably chose the poem because of its distinctive appearance, although the visual element does not contribute to its meaning in the way it would in a properly Concrete poem. In 1967, Finlay devoted the entirety of Issue 17 of *Poor, Old, Tired, Horse*, to Lax. Issue 18 was given over to one of Reinhardt's dogmatic texts beginning 'There is just one Art'. Later still, Finlay's 'Homage to Robert Lax'<sup>521</sup> employed Reinhardt's name as one of its few words, appropriately broken up into syllables in imitation of Lax's vertical style. Stephen Bann included Lax in his 1967 Concrete anthology, and Mary Ellen Solt followed suit in what is perhaps the best-known collection, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*.

Despite the fact that the contributors' notes to Merton's periodical *Monks Pond* proclaimed Lax in 1968 to be 'a concrete poet of international fame',<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> Hansjörg Mayer, [a], in Stephen Bann, ed., *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (London Magazine Editions, 1967), p. 64; [c], [f], [o], [r], [i], and [l], in Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer, *Concerning Concrete Poetry* (London: Writers Forum, 1978), p. xxii. Mayer's poems appear in a section of Cobbing and Mayer's publication that is bound upside down and begins from the back.

<sup>520</sup> Emmett Williams, 'Foreword and Acknowledgments', in Williams, ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, p. vi.

<sup>521</sup> Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Homage to Robert Lax* (Lanark, Scotland: Wild Hawthorn Press, 1974).

<sup>522</sup> *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine*, ed. Daggy, p. 347.

doubts that Lax truly fit in the company of Concrete poets crept in early on. In the introduction to his anthology, Stephen Bann admits that ‘Indeed Robert Lax comes closer than any other poet whose work is included in this collection to achieving an almost “abstract” style’. By ‘abstract’, Bann intended

something significantly different from “concrete”: something which is in fact almost the antithesis of concrete. ... One might say that the concrete procedure is inductive, while that of the abstract is reductive. And it is this element of reduction which is the remarkable feature of Robert Lax’s work.<sup>523</sup>

Whether or not Bann’s analysis of Concrete procedure is correct, his statement about the reductive element in Lax’s work, a combination of abstraction and Minimalism, certainly is.

In notes for the comment he wrote to accompany a reading of his work recorded by the Library of Congress in 1965, Lax addressed the paradox of the abstract and the concrete in poetry. Poems are necessarily both concrete *and* abstract, he wrote. ‘The more concrete / the more / abstract’ and ‘the more abstract / the more / concrete’. A poem’s ‘being is / concrete’; ‘its meaning / abstract’. Nevertheless, Lax was emphatic about the value of abstraction. Abstraction, like song, is a path to the divine. As I quoted Lax as saying previously: ‘the greatest abstraction refers precisely to the highest (and simplest) meaning of the highest (and simplest being)’.<sup>524</sup> But apart from its nature as ‘one of the aspirations of the human spirit’, poetry is ‘essentially a play of syllables’.

The play of syllables is what ‘IK OK’ (the latter is not to be confused with ‘o.k.’), is all about. ‘IK OK’,<sup>525</sup> published in Bann’s anthology of Concrete poetry and included in Lax’s notes for his commentary, is composed entirely of those two

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<sup>523</sup> Stephen Bann, ‘Introduction’, *Concrete Poetry*, p. 25.

<sup>524</sup> I have already pointed out the association Lax made between simplicity and that which is aesthetically and morally ‘right’.

<sup>525</sup> Lax, ‘IK OK’, in Bann, ed., *Concrete Poetry*, pp. 192-193.

syllables, repeated in a rhythmic pattern. Using syllables alone rather than words serves the aims of abstraction. Lax explains that if he says 'ik / ik / ik', if he puts 'three syllables in a line', then 'they stand for what they are'.

a question may be raised as to what they represent  
not a thing  
seen often enough in relation to other syllables they will  
(eventually) represent (precisely) that relationship: they will  
represent themselves in that relationship.<sup>526</sup>

It is difficult to read a poem made of words without thinking about what those words refer to or represent. By using just syllables, Lax undercuts the referential function of words, and thus allows us to attend to the structure of the poem, conceived as the relationship between the syllables. This is a similar strategy to that he employed in 'AAA' and '123', using only letters and numbers rather than words. It is the pattern, the relationship between elements that such poetry attempts to evoke.

In his 'concise statement of my project', written as part of his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship in the mid-sixties, Lax emphasised the syllable as the key to his poetic research. He viewed the syllable as 'the unit of which poems are made'.<sup>527</sup> His work with it was part of his effort

to dig under the present structures of world poetry in search of a  
firmer and deeper foundation  
to discover beneath the traditional modes of poetry a firmer, more  
universal foundation

to discover deep in the human consciousness a firmer, more  
universal foundation for the (eternal) & recurrent modes of poetry

The spiritual aspect of this project is expressed by Lax's description of poetry as 'a disentanglement, slow and patient of the soul's own inner & eternal song'.<sup>528</sup>

One of the motivations behind Lax's interest in abstract patterns is religious. His

<sup>526</sup> Lax, '(notes for comment)', n.d., Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>527</sup> Lax, 'description of project', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 48.

<sup>528</sup> Lax, 'concise statement of my project', *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, p. 52.



is a vision of reality in which the divine is abstract and most real. Worldly and physical instantiations of patterns participate in them only imperfectly, nevertheless they provide a way for us to glimpse those patterns. Lax wants to facilitate awareness of the divine patterns of which poems (and anything with physical existence) are only imperfect copies. By trying to locate the basic patterns at work in the world, he tried to get closer to God.

Some poems that are arguably Concrete rather than abstract are derived from Lax's colour poems. These include 'Another Red Red Blue Poem', which was published by Journeyman in 1971 on a single sheet of stiff paper. If one knew nothing about Lax and did not know the title of the work, one might easily mistake it for a work of visual art, for the work is printed in a format more common to visual art than to writing. We might believe that the word, or at least a part of a word, is the minimal unit of poetry. But in the case of the colour poems, Lax abandoned words—and language—altogether. The poem is reduced to its essence as pattern. Instead, the poem is composed of uniform red and blue horizontal bars arranged in columns. Knowledge of Lax's colour poems makes it easy to read this as a 'poem', and it even shows evidence of Lax's familiar 3 and 4 patterning. The first grouping is of three red, three blue, four red, and four blue bars repeated in the second group, again in the fifth, and in the final group as well. *Cloning for Yellow*<sup>529</sup> is an eight-page work, with two groups of three columns of roughly square scribbles in red, blue, green, and yellow on each page. The work is regularly patterned, with the centre column always a single colour, and the final one repeating the sequence of red, blue, green, and yellow squares.

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<sup>529</sup> Lax, *Cloning for Yellow* (Zurich: Seedorf Verlag, 1984).

The temptation to refer to these poems as Concrete is strong. They are made of particular, individual patches of colour rather than, as with other Lax colour poems, words that refer to colours in an abstract or general sense. But despite their undeniable materiality and their lack of referential elements such as words, in the context of Lax's work they must be read as instances of a pattern, and hence as abstract. There is a rhythm in the repetitions and permutations in the poems that makes it possible to conceive of them as song. By 1972, Lax said that the term 'abstract poetry' was 'still ok' as a description of what he was doing, but 'concrete' and 'anti-poetry' were not, and he suggested as a possible addition 'metapoetry'.<sup>530</sup>

I have already discussed the importance of music and song to Lax's conception of poetry, but I have only hinted at the autonomous nature of music that he often expressed as a goal for literature. He referred a number of times to the idea that 'all arts aspire to the condition of music'. As the least representational of the arts, music is the most abstract. Unlike words, musical notes do not refer. Music is the ideal form for those who insist upon the strict separation of art and life, as did Reinhardt. Lax often repeated such views, and could be emphatic in his pronouncements. He wrote:

literature  
isn't born  
from life  
it's born  
from lit-  
erature  
[...]  
then it  
doesn't  
lead back  
to life  
either

---

<sup>530</sup> Lax, letter to Antonucci, 11 September 1972.

but only  
to lit-  
erature<sup>531</sup>

And:

art is from art; think not that it should be otherwise<sup>532</sup>

As well as:

they look  
alike

but art  
is art

and life  
is life

[...]

(and each one  
must be judged  
apart)<sup>533</sup>

Reinhardt's ideas about the relationship between life and art, related to the issue of abstraction in art, were to trouble Lax for years to come. Even while he was making pronouncements about the total separation of art from life, he was letting slip remarks that show he was not entirely convinced.

In fact, there is evidence that even some of his most abstract works had a basis in actual life. While some of Lax's poems are abstract in the sense often used to refer to abstract painting, in their complete lack of representation, others do depict or refer to things in the world, but have been subjected to such a rigorous programme of abstraction that they are unrecognisable as such. Lax had long been concerned about world affairs, and had long tried to shape his expressions of those concerns in a Minimalist fashion. In his notebooks in 1939 he

<sup>531</sup> 'Acey-Ducey' Notebook, 30 May 1959.

<sup>532</sup> 'Acey-Ducey' Notebook, 24 May 1959.

<sup>533</sup> /23 Notebook (late 1960-early 1961), Lax Papers, Columbia University.

often put forth strong objections to war, and emphatically proscribed killing. A typescript dated 17 September 1939 records a conversation with a woman about impending war. A pencilled note at the top of the first page reads 'rewrite leaving out names, initials, and specific references'.<sup>534</sup> Lax's political consciousness was fully active at the same time he was writing such purely aesthetic poems as those in *New Poems*. For example, 'The Bomb: Scenario for Auditorium' (circa 1961),<sup>535</sup> presents in stark terms the human consequences of using weapons of mass destruction. An undated postcard from Lax to Emil Antonucci contains the poem 'war/peace', composed entirely of the letters 'm' and 'r'.<sup>536</sup> Lax's long poem 'Sea & Sky',<sup>537</sup> can also be read as having political implications; certainly it situates itself within a political context (though not a specific one).

'Sea & Sky' is divided into seven sections. Each page has just one thin column; in most cases each line consists of a single word or syllable. The form is catechismal, but the questions are rhetorical responses to the statements rather than the statements answering the questions.

they  
groan

why  
do  
they  
groan (17)

The poem quickly withdraws from this opening involving the troubled state of nations, and turns to natural phenomena. The question

why  
do  
the

<sup>534</sup> Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>535</sup> *33 Poems*, pp. 70-73.

<sup>536</sup> Lax papers, Columbia University.

<sup>537</sup> Reprint from *The Lugano Review* 1:3-4 (September 1965), pp. 17-132. Page references will be given parenthetically.

nations  
groan  
&  
why  
do  
they  
re-  
peat

a  
vain  
thing  
? (18)

Is followed by a statement of natural conditions and an exhortation to react in the most basic way:

the  
clouds

the  
clouds

are  
ris-  
ing

(over  
the  
sea)

the winter

the winter

(is  
com-  
ing)

sit  
closer

to-  
geth-  
er

sit  
closer

as  
well

to  
the  
earth

(for  
the  
cold

comes  
on) (18-19)

This can, of course, be construed as a response to the political situation, the cold of winter as analogy for war or difficulty among nations. In any case, the poem calls for attention to the most basic of human conditions and the need for the warmth provided by human solidarity. Lax is, in a sense, encouraging people to dig deep and look for the foundations, look for the basic principles of life and be guided by them rather than focus on the intricacies and entanglements of politics.

Lax demonstrates his mastery of rhythm, even when using just a few elements, on page 21 of *Sea & Sky*, where the following lines are repeated:

not

thus  
&  
thus

&  
thus

&  
thus

but

thus

&  
thus

&

thus

‘thus / & / thus’ establishes a rapid pace that carries over into the succeeding lines ‘& / thus’. But when the latter phrase is repeated after the single ‘thus’ that follows ‘but’, the tempo is slow and deliberate. Rhythm is clearly the issue here, for Lax’s next lines are ‘a / cer- / tain // rhythm’ (22). The import of pages 22 and 23 is that observation of rhythm through changes should be noted, and awareness of it amounts to a form of knowledge. To be able to discern a rhythm, as will become evident, is to find a unifying pattern in mutable surface phenomena.

The notion of psalm comes up with the mention of praise later in section I (24-26), and in section II, we have ‘the / world’ ‘with- / in’ ‘that / sings’ (35), suggesting the connection between song and universal patterns. Christianity is also alluded to in section II, with ‘the / fire // of / thorn’, and a dove that ‘comes / down’ (38, 40). The idea of refined words that Lax connects with a Godly purity also appears in this section (42-43), which ends with a statement of unity and the ultimately unchanging nature of things (44).

In section III the idea of the song as one of love is introduced (52-54). This is connected to the notion of spiritual desire, which recurs in the mention of sea and sky reaching up and leaning down towards one another (104-106), the ‘dream- / ing’ sea gazing at the ‘smil- / ing’ sky, and their reaching towards one another (114-118), as well as the sea’s ‘yearn- / ing’ (126, 130). A further statement of unity—‘all / dreams // one / dream’ (58) opens section IV, where Lax uses the similarity of words and word particles to suggest a larger or underlying similarity in the things those words describe.

the  
seas

the

seas

the  
sea

the  
sea

the  
seas

the  
seas

the  
sea

the  
sea

sea-  
sons

&  
sea-  
sons

sea-  
sons

&  
sea-  
sons

the  
seas

the  
seas

the  
sea (60-61)<sup>538</sup>

One's attention is drawn to fact that the word 'sea' is contained in the word  
'seasons'. The repetition, the endless return of the latter is thus equated with the

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<sup>538</sup> The repetition is more extensive: I only quote a part of it.



ceaseless rocking to and fro of the sea. Splitting ‘seasons’ into two also gives us ‘sea sons’: are these sailors, or simply all men? At the end of this passage, the multiple ‘seas’ are unified in a single ‘sea’.

‘These / are / the / sea- / sons // of / sun // & / sea’ (66): from this grand scale of the rhythms of these earthly phenomena, the poem moves to the brilliance of a surface effect involving both. The ‘spangle’, ‘dapple’, and ‘bangle’ of the sun playing on the sea are joyously expressed, and the ‘ng’ sounds are repeated in the word ‘sing’ (69). Lax is drawing parallels between such beautiful sights as light on the waves and the sound of song. They are on the same level, that of things which can be perceived directly by the senses, and which, though they involve the particular and deal with surfaces, are manifestations of a collective or underlying order.

Section VI becomes more explicit, with the changes and slow movements of the sea identified with music (92-96). A question that is crucial to Lax’s poetics, in the context of this poem, occurs in this section:

what  
cur-  
rent  
  
what  
cur-  
rent  
  
is  
un-  
der  
  
the  
sea (99)

The question is reprised on the antepenultimate page of the poem as

what  
are

the  
cur-  
rents

un-  
der

the  
sea (130)

The search for the patterns under the sea, and, by implication, the patterns informing all natural phenomena as well as song, music and poetry, is the driving force behind Lax's writing. He is looking for or describing similarities: he is engaged in the process of (in his own words) 'discovering principles at work in the universe and applying them to art, discovering that all the principles are one, & applying that to art'.<sup>539</sup>

I hinted above that for Lax, the solution to political troubles can be found by abstracting from the situation and seeking the eternal, recurrent patterns at work in the world. This is, ultimately, a religious appeal, and Lax's spiritual beliefs are clearly central to his Minimalist poetic practice. The following discussion of the context for another of Lax's long poems, *Black & White*,<sup>540</sup> will help to illustrate the way in which some of his abstract Minimalist poetry also has a basis in actual life. It will also demonstrate why Lax, despite his commitment to abstraction, had difficulty with Reinhardt's doctrine of the separation between art and life.

*Black & White*, which was also published by the *Lugano Review*, in 1966, is far sparser than *Sea & Sky*. It contains only the three elements in the title—two colour words and an ampersand—plus the word stone. It is divided into twenty-one sections, and 'stone' disappears after the fifth. The poem is in the typical Lax

<sup>539</sup> Untitled notes, September 21, 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>540</sup> *Black & White* (Journeyman, 1971), n.p. First published in *The Lugano Review* 1:5-6 (1966).

‘vertical’ style, with one word (or symbol) to the line, but in this case there is at times more than one column on the page. In a letter to Merton in the autumn of 1963, Lax included ‘the first part of the second volume of the book I am always writing’,<sup>541</sup> which in the context of their exchange at this time (on which more to follow) seems likely to have been *Black & White*.

A brutal act of political violence served as the backdrop for the correspondence between Lax and Merton in which this poem was included. On 15 September 1963, four young black girls were killed in a racist bomb attack while attending church in Birmingham, Alabama. On October 5, Merton wrote Lax that he was ‘tired of belonging to the humiliating white race’.<sup>542</sup> Reinhardt was a prominent subject of exchanges between Lax and Merton at this time. They discussed his participation in Civil Rights marches, and writing from Greece, Lax declared himself present at the marches in spirit. Both men were full of praise for Reinhardt, and not just for his political activities.

By this time Reinhardt was painting his five-foot square black paintings exclusively. ‘Old Reinhardt is a splendid fellow and all but the king of the birds’, wrote Lax. ‘His paintings is magnificent and works like dynamite when set down in any particular locale. They are all black paintings (get it?) black, black, black & can hardly help doing some good in the whole situation’.<sup>543</sup> The suggestion is that Reinhardt’s black paintings might have some political efficacy, despite the painter’s own strict insistence on the separation between art and life. In the midst of this conversation, Lax gave Merton some poetic advice:

as reinhardt makes now all the time the same black painting, make  
you also all the time the same dark poem; all the time, just that one  
poem: here a word, there a word, maybe a little different; only

<sup>541</sup> Lax to Merton, 2 November, 1963, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, p. 259.

<sup>542</sup> *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, p. 251.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

when you think it should be, until it gets to be tight as a sonnet: the music, the music always the same, here a word, there a word just a little different.

'You got the right answers', returned Merton on October 23,

I think this poem should get blacker and blacker and blacker like Reinhardt's paintings, then everyone will see the light, they will have to. Every man got one poem, and when he stumbles on it he got to make it smaller and smaller and blacker and blacker and then it will finally convince.

Lax replied that he had 'of recent months become so generally small & black myself that it is useless for me to apply for abrogation from the whites. How come you want to get out of the race (they would snigger) you was never in it'.<sup>544</sup>

Lax's colour poems are composed in accordance with the advice he had given Merton: 'here a word, there a word maybe a little different', and with a recurring pattern, 'the music always the same'. His continued experiments with colour poems, reprises of poems using specific colours, and poems instantiating the same pattern indicate that he was writing 'all the time the same poem'. Merton made note of the utter simplicity of this notion, illustrated in the poem Lax had sent him, yet knew that people might nevertheless find it difficult to grasp.

If anybody comes up to you and say what does it mean what is it for black white stop the train and drop him off or remind him he is not on the train. These poems are the only ones really easy to understand that have ever been written, and other poems that seem easy are a big fraud, taking away the customer's money for an illusion, whereas your poems are very easy to understand they mean exactly what they say, black white, blackblackblack, etc, what is simpler than that?<sup>545</sup>

Merton may have been alluding to Reinhardt's claim that his were 'the first paintings which cannot be misunderstood',<sup>546</sup> when he wrote 'these poems are the only ones really easy to understand'. Lax replied in terms that suggest he too saw

<sup>544</sup> Ibid., pp. 255-259.

<sup>545</sup> Merton, letter to Lax, November [1963], *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, p. 261.

<sup>546</sup> See *Art-as-Art*, p. 11.

the poem as 'pure' abstraction, in equating the contrast between black and white with that between 'up & down' and 'in & out'. Yet he agreed with Merton's remark that 'underneath this book is the real poem which is not to be spoken'.<sup>547</sup>

The idea of the 'real' poem that cannot be spoken may have religious connotations. If God is perfect and abstract, without material qualities, he cannot be described in any straightforward way. Language is not adequate for that which is divine and most real. These ideas also accord with negative theology, in which one cannot say what God is, but only what he is not.<sup>548</sup> Nevertheless, *Black & White* also represents an extreme version of abstracting from current events in order to make them visible from a different perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Given the context of the Civil Rights movement and the violent racist attacks in which this poem found its way to Merton, as well as the remarks in those letters in the autumn of 1963, it is difficult to believe that Lax's choice of the terms 'black' and 'white' is entirely divorced from life. Perhaps part of the point of placing 'black' and 'white' next to each other in a poem with little or nothing else in addition is to point up their equality as words, and, by analogy, to suggest political equality among the races. Abstracting from the situation that originally inspired the work provides a new perspective on it. Black and white are only colours after all.

*Black & White* begins with reference to events, but those events are subjected to a process of radical abstraction. As with one type of abstract painting described by Harold Osborne at the beginning of this chapter, the topic, in this

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> For the connection between Reinhardt and negative theology, see, for example, Nancy Spector, 'Negativity, Purity, and the Clearness of Ambiguity: Ad Reinhardt, Joseph Kosuth, and F. Gonzalez-Torres' in *Art and Design* 9:1-2 (January/February 1994), pp. 6-11, Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 176, and Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Limit of Almost', *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 29. On Lax and Reinhardt and the 'Via Negativa', see David Miller, *Notes Written at a Night Window: On Ad Reinhardt* (London: Form Books, 1994).

case racial relations, is no longer immediately recognisable. Ironically, Lax has achieved such extreme abstraction by retaining precisely those terms that are problematical, those that designate people according to skin colour. Black and white become equal in his poem, and there is beauty to be found in patterns made by virtue of their contrast. By carrying abstraction from a real-life situation so far, by taking this poem from what I have argued was its source in political events to the point where it appears to have no reference to anything at all, Lax may seem to have resolved any qualms about Reinhardt's dictates. But the question about the relationship between life and art continued to nag him.

Lax continued to write about the 'weary question of life & art'<sup>549</sup> at length, working out his ideas in notes that make it clear that the question of the relationship between art and life was for him essentially one about abstraction in art. Lax also associated the issue with his colour poetry: many colour poems accompany these notes. In the autumn of 1972 Lax explicitly stated what the context of the 1963 'Black and White' poem suggested, that 'life or "life" provides models for art at a certain early stage of the game'.<sup>550</sup> The artist then engages in a process of reduction and refinement, gradually withdrawing from the worldly model in order to produce a work of art. But that is only one sort of abstraction. In the other, abstraction and 'purification' of art, that is, art drawing on its own resources rather than looking outside its domain, 'is not a divorce from life which relegates it to a barren sphere', and it may lead to a closer relationship with or understanding of God, the ultimate source of life. 'It is an extension, a development of life, as abstract science is. [...] it is a further development of nature, a further refinement of processes already in existence'. Reinhardt's name,

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<sup>549</sup> Untitled notes, 12 July 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>550</sup> Untitled notes, 21 September 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

as usual, comes up in the context of the remarks quoted above: 'abstract painting, as painting, has a short way to go, and has probably gone it. Reinhardt may not have been wrong in saying he was doing the last paintings', even though the other arts lag behind in furthering 'the new non-mimetic modes'.<sup>551</sup>

Lax does seem to have finally rejected Reinhardt's insistence on the absolute autonomy of art. The following by Lax appeared in the catalogue for an exhibition of his work shown alongside Reinhardt's in Stuttgart in 1985:

I'm beginning to think  
r was wrong

not r, but an idea i had  
of him that i practically  
worshipped

that said life was the  
opposite of art

& art was the opposite  
of life

& proud of it

but i think life  
has something  
to do with art

& it's just a matter  
of finding

the special point

at which the two of them  
get together<sup>552</sup>

A point is a small thing, and to find it one must train the focus of the mind, clear away the clutter of consciousness, reduce the concentration to that which matters,

<sup>551</sup> Lax, Untitled notes, 21 September 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>552</sup> Quoted in Sigrid Hauff, *A Line in Three Circles: The Inner Biography of Robert Lax* (Munich: Belleville Verlag, 1999), p. 197. Also published in *Timeless Painting: Ad Reinhardt* (exhibition catalogue) (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie, 1985), p. 85. This seems to me to be an example of Lax's writing that has been taken as poem because it is broken up into lines, although it does not feature the sort of rhythmic pattern he regarded as essential to poetry.

to the essential juncture of life of art. Lax's many years of experimentation with abstract Minimalism were directed in search of that point. By abstracting from life so that the world and events in it could be represented in a purified form or from an eternal perspective, Lax sought to make visible the traces of divine in the material realm. To make the imperfect world appear in accordance with the perfection of the ultimately real and abstract, Lax employed a reductive method, deducting, removing, and withdrawing, using the process of abstraction to come closer to that which is abstract.

This method of abstraction also informs another group of his poems. Lax showed himself able to subject observations of the natural world to a process of abstraction, to utilise his reductive and repetitive methods in the composition of nature poetry. 'One Island'<sup>553</sup> is a nature poem that is representative of Lax's poetry in a number of ways. It has the characteristic short lines of one syllable each and few words relative to its length, it features repetition, geometric shapes, colour words, and rhythmic patterning. It is perhaps less abstract than some of his poems because it explicitly links colours with things in the world:

black  
rocks

black  
rocks

green  
leaves

green  
leaves

---

<sup>553</sup> 'One Island', *Love Had a Compass*, pp. 99-117.



But at places in the poem such identifications are dispensed with, and the colours are presented on their own. Lax also writes of impressions of sound in this poem, such as

goat's  
cry

goat's  
cry

bird's  
cry

bird's  
cry

He incorporates things that appeal to other senses as well:

land  
smell

land  
smell

sea  
smell

sea  
smell

Even these seem abstract, though, for they are not connected to a specific place or time, nor are the descriptions given detailed enough to form a particularised image. Instead, it later becomes obvious that lines such as

cir  
cle

of  
brown

cir  
cle

of

blue

refer to 'land / cir / cle' and 'sea / cir / cle'. The words almost describe the way an abstract painter might depict these things. The poem ends on a unifying note:

is  
land

one  
is  
land

one  
rock

one  
sea

Although rock and sea are elements that contrast with one another, the concept of an island brings them together, and the simple patterns of Lax's poem also unify the various phenomena mentioned in it.

Another poem in this vein is 'Dark Earth Bright Sky' (1985):

dark  
earth

dark  
night

dark  
earth

dark  
night

bright  
sky

bright  
day

bright  
sky

bright  
day

dark  
earth

dark  
earth

dark  
earth

dark  
earth

bright

bright

sky

sky<sup>554</sup>

There may be religious implications in the contrast between the light and brightness of the sky and the darkness of the earth. Light is a traditional symbol for the spiritual, or for the grace of God. Its source is apart from the earth, which receives light as a benefit bestowed from above. But the pattern of light and dark is also relevant to earthly existence. We could not be more familiar with the simple contrasting elements in this poem, but we often allow the clutter of our lives to obscure our awareness of them. Lax meditates upon them and presents them anew, purified and clarified for our consideration. The contrasting terms and simple rhythm of the poem reflect the two poles that define life on earth and the rhythms of alternating light and dark (similar to the black and white in Lax's poetry), as the earth turns in the sky, that give order to our lives. We are reminded of the presence of forces in the world much larger than we are that make patterns and provide regularity. With the help of life-giving light and the restful dark, life exists at the conjunction of earth and sky. This is truly essential poetry, poetry with its roots deep in the universal foundation of the human consciousness.

Richard Kostelanetz has said that Lax is 'among America's greatest poets, a true minimalist who can weave awesome poems from remarkably few words',<sup>555</sup> and I agree. Lax's particular brand of abstract Minimalism sets him apart from most contemporary American poets. It is inextricably bound with claims for his excellence, for it is not just the case that Lax is good *and* a Minimalist: Lax is good through or *because of* his Minimalism. Abstraction is the key to his

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<sup>554</sup> Lax, *Dark Earth Bright Sky* (Furthermore, 1985), n.p.

<sup>555</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, 'Robert Lax: Neglected Minimalist', *American Book Review*, XXI/3 (March-April 2000), p. 24.

Minimalism. His achievements in this mode represent some of the best of literary Minimalism itself and demonstrate the power a reductive method can hold for getting to the root of essential questions about literature.

Lax often inspires a certain reverence in those who know his work, and this extends from the realm of art into life, into a fascination with the man himself. This is perhaps most evident in Humbert and Penzel's film and video installation, in which the camera at times lingers close to Lax's face, showing only his eyes. Mundane tasks such as washing dishes and feeding cats are attended to with solemnity in the film. The camera follows Lax down the winding streets of the village on the island of Patmos where Lax lived for more than thirty years at the end of his life, and patiently records the process of an elderly Lax walking into the sea, step by step, with the aid of a cane. Lax himself was quoted as saying that Humbert and Penzel's *Three Windows* shows him 'on three screens at once in slightly differing phases of doing practically nothing'.<sup>556</sup>

Such idolatry goes too far in confusing admiration for the man with appreciation for the work. As Rupert Loydell puts it, the film and video are part of 'the attempted canonisation' of Lax as 'Saint Bob'.<sup>557</sup> Lax does seem to have been a remarkable person, but his reputation as an artist may eventually be compromised as the result of attitudes such as that behind *Three Windows*. Because Lax is regarded with such awe by some, nearly anything he has written is considered fair game for publication, even if little of this is likely to reach a large

<sup>556</sup> Julian Mitchell, 'A Sort of Bliss (Robert Lax: Poems to Be Seen)', *Modern Painters* 13:1 (Spring 2000), p. 53.

<sup>557</sup> Loydell, 'Saint Bob: The Attempted Canonisation of Robert Lax', *Sride Magazine*, July 2002, [www.stridemag.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/2002/july/lax.htm](http://www.stridemag.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/2002/july/lax.htm). Accessed 25 May 2004.

audience because the publication is by relatively obscure presses.<sup>558</sup> Lax seems to have been guilty of going along with these schemes, whether for some sort of (no doubt small) financial reward, or simply because he was flattered by the attention. Perhaps, as Loydell, suggests, he was just easily led,<sup>559</sup> or overly generous. It is in the spirit of upholding the value of Lax's unique poetry and artistic principles above the idolisation of the man that I offer the following, which may go some short way toward undercutting the view of Lax as a saint.

Lax was a man, after all, and grew weary himself of his saintly reputation. 'I'm tired of being so noble', he confessed in a notebook. Among the materials in the archives at Columbia I found some lovely, mildly erotic bits of writing, and some traces of a rather shocking irreverence. This undated poem may not be blasphemous, exactly, but it is not the most respectful:

God this  
God that

God this  
God that

God love  
God hate

God bless  
God damn

God damn  
God bless

God hate  
God love

God that  
God this

God this

---

<sup>558</sup> Loydell remarks on this phenomenon, wondering whether 'we aren't going to see the same kind of pseudo-canonisation of Lax that has happened to Thomas Merton, where everything he ever wrote gets to be published'. Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid.

God that<sup>560</sup>

This poem echoes 'The Port Was Longing', but the sentiment is quite different.

Notions of the pure abstraction of the colour poems are brought swiftly to earth by 'Poor White and Body's Rapture', at the side of which Lax inscribed 'thanks Joyce'—James, no doubt. It seems as if Lax was trying to work out in the poem itself the problem of the relationship between art and life. The colours there are 'pus yellow', 'piss yellow', 'spleen green', 'slime green', 'snot green', 'shit brown', 'phlegm grey', and 'jism white'.<sup>561</sup> In other words, Lax has here explicitly tied the colours to bodily substances. This colour poem is therefore not abstract, but it still resembles in form the numerous abstract colour poems.

The bodily again becomes the focus in the most surprising item I encountered in the Lax archives. A notebook titled 'Chunks' from December 1972 includes what Lax called notes for a poster poem that (*unsurprisingly*) remains unpublished.

why  
did  
n't  
you

fuck  
her

when  
you  
had

the  
chance

?<sup>562</sup>

<sup>560</sup> Untitled, Undated Poem, Lax Papers, Columbia University. I found this poem in a box with material from or related to *Circus of the Sun*.

<sup>561</sup> Lax, 'Poor White and Body's Rapture', 30 September-2 October [1972?], Athens, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>562</sup> 'fuck notes (poster)', 'Chunks' notebook, December 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

Lax confessed a fascination with, or at least the desire to read a novel about, Chinese prostitutes. The Japanese ones, it seems, were too clean, prim and proper, and courteous for his liking.<sup>563</sup> Such an interest is surely not a saintly one, and it seems to contradict legends about Lax such as that, while in France, he ‘stayed several days at a flophouse before realizing it was a brothel’.<sup>564</sup> The following undated lines, selected from a fairly long poem called ‘Whores’, suggest if not familiarity, then at least a preoccupation with prostitutes:

polite whore  
impolite whore

old whore  
young whore

city whore  
country whore

active whore  
contemplative whore

live whore  
dead whore

labor whore  
management whore

soft-as-soap whore  
hard-as-nails whore

clean whore  
dirty whore

frontwards whore  
backwards whore

upside down whore  
rightside up whore

calced whore  
discalced whore

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<sup>563</sup> ‘A Conscious Stream’, 8-9 May 1972, Lax Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>564</sup> ‘Robert Lax, Enigmatic Hermit’, *Hermitary: Resources and Reflections on Hermits and Solitude*, 2004, <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/lax.html>. Accessed 12 October 2004.

straight whore  
crooked whore

triumphant whore  
abject whore

Perhaps the end of the poem can only be appreciated by those who know Lax's work and some of the contrasts and oppositions that shaped it and his ideas on art. For those with such knowledge, the laughter it provokes brings it, and this chapter, to a fitting conclusion:

concrete  
whore

abstract  
whore<sup>565</sup>

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<sup>565</sup> 'Whores' undated poem, Lax Papers, Columbia University.



## CHAPTER 5: *Lydia Davis*

My initial response to the writing of Lydia Davis was intense excitement at having discovered an author whose originality and talent were apparent within the first few pages. In that first encounter I believe I held my breath while reading 'Story' (which is mercifully short), and knew immediately that I wanted to read more of Davis's work. I was also intrigued and a bit mystified by my reaction. What I noticed right away about 'Story' was the flat, unadorned, almost conversational tone. This gave it a personal touch, as if a friend were relating something that had happened to her. How, I wondered, could something so ordinary be so fascinating? I gradually realised that Davis's work, though deceptively simple and focused on the quotidian, was both deeply philosophical and formally innovative, and I was convinced that I had found a writer worth pursuing.

Davis published her first collection of stories, *The Thirteenth Woman*, in 1976. That book shows evidence of the distinctive style that she would continue to develop and that is manifested in her fifth collection, *Samuel Johnson is Indignant*, twenty-five years later. By the 1980s, the decade in which the controversy over the Minimalist American short story raged, Davis was publishing books and stories that reveal confidence and maturity in her chosen way of writing. Although she demonstrated a commitment to formal reduction that marked her as a Minimalist, Davis was not classified along with writers such as Carver and Robison. Her work does, however, bear certain similarities to theirs. Like Carver, she is concerned with the nature and function of stories, and like Robison, she frequently divides stories into smaller units. Her stories, like those of Carver and Robison, often have first-person narrators, and she shares their

tendency to narrow the focus of her fiction. But Davis's subject is as often language itself as it is the domestic or mundane. The result is a more extreme Minimalism, in style, scale, form, and material, and more obviously experimental writing.

In addition to writing fiction, Davis is an active translator. She works primarily on French writers, including Maurice Blanchot and Michel Leiris. In May 2000, the French government honoured Davis's translation efforts by proclaiming her Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres. Her version of Proust's *Du Côté de chez Swann*, *The Way by Swann's*, was published by Penguin in 2002. As a MacArthur Foundation Fellow in 2003, Davis was awarded \$500,000 support over a period of five years. Davis recently taught at Bard College, and is now an associate professor and writer-in-residence at the State University of New York at Albany.

Davis's most common themes are the idea of 'storyness', or what makes a story, the nature of the self, and the recalcitrance of language. These themes are often intertwined, and she explores them by means of analysis, breaking things down and examining them. The end result usually reveals the inadequacies of language, the elusiveness of the self, and the difficulty of locating and defining 'story'. But the persistence of Davis's efforts (and those of her characters and narrators) attests to her faith in the existence of self and story and in the representational power of language. Davis has said that she sees the philosophical 'investigation of reality' as a 'higher value'<sup>566</sup> in her writing, and her stance is ultimately a realist one.

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<sup>566</sup> Christopher Knight, 'An Interview with Lydia Davis', *Contemporary Literature* 40 (1999), p. 534.

Davis's literary experiments, with their close analysis of language and story, go beyond investigation to the creation of new forms. These forms are designed to remake the story in the name of a closer connection between language and reality. 'I'm always led by the possibilities of a form,' Davis has said, 'that's what is exciting to me'.<sup>567</sup> In her analytical stories about stories, Davis succeeds in creating new forms, and in providing a refreshing perspective on the role of stories in our lives. She tackles in her formally innovative fiction the subject of the relationship between reality on the one hand and language and schemes of order and classification on the other. Both by using the ordering device of analytical thinking as her method and by making it the subject of her work, Davis creates her own distinctive brand of Minimalism and makes a unique contribution to contemporary American fiction.

The title 'Break It Down', given both to one of Davis's stories and to a 1986 collection, is emblematic of her fiction. Analysis is a compositional method for Davis, and thus a formal means of exploring genre. She breaks her stories into constituent elements in a variety of ways. Many proceed via analysis of a phrase, so that the logic or development of the examination determines the story's form. Her characters can often be seen resorting to various analytic processes in futile attempts to come to terms with painful or confusing aspects of their lives. Logical analysis, as an attempt to understand the concept of the self and relationships between people and between language and the world, is one of her recurring themes. Davis's method of breaking down does not reveal the constructed nature of entities such as the self, but rather points to the sense of self and to emotion as

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid., p. 546.

things that elude analytical examination. The whole, it seems, is more than the sum of the parts into which it can be broken.

The most immediately striking feature of Davis's stories is their extreme brevity, and this has contributed to some confusion regarding their generic classification. Marjorie Perloff has described her work as 'poet's prose'.<sup>568</sup> Two of Davis's Minimalist compositions, 'Betrayal' and 'A Mown Lawn,' appeared in *Best American Poetry*, in 1999 and 2001 respectively, and three of her pieces are included in the 2003 anthology *Great American Prose Poems*.<sup>569</sup> The concision of Davis's stories was no doubt a factor in their selection for these volumes. Her intensive focus on language and sensitivity to rhythm are also suggestive of poetry. She is said to be 'admired by poets (particularly the Language poets), and indeed often shelved in the poetry section of bookstores'.<sup>570</sup> Davis has said that Russell Edson, whose brief works are usually designated prose poetry, 'jolted me out of my stuckness in long conventional stories and into one-paragraph freedom'.<sup>571</sup> Nevertheless, Davis situates herself solidly within the tradition of fiction rather than poetry. Although she has published a novel, *The End of the Story*, Davis has also said that she considers herself a short story writer rather than a novelist.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, p. 190.

<sup>569</sup> *Best American Poetry 1999*, guest editor Robert Bly, series editor David Lehman (New York: Scribner, 2000); *Best American Poetry 2001*, guest editor Robert Hass, series editor David Lehman (New York: Scribner, 2001). 'The Thirteenth Woman', 'In the Garment District', and 'Agreement', *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*, ed. David Lehman (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2003), pp. 191-192.

<sup>570</sup> Kasia Boddy, 'Lydia Davis', *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story*, ed. Blanche H. Gelfant (Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 220.

<sup>571</sup> Larry McCaffrey, 'Deliberately, Terribly Neutral: An Interview with Lydia Davis', *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 67.

<sup>572</sup> Thad Ziolkowski, Interview with Lydia Davis (1997). *Index*. 2001. 25 February 2003. [http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/interview\\_davis.html](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/interview_davis.html).

Davis has long practiced Minimalism of scale. *The Thirteenth Woman* (1976) included single-paragraph stories, as do her later collections *Break It Down* (1986) and *Almost No Memory* (1997).<sup>573</sup> Davis's most recent collection includes her shortest stories to date. Seven consist of only two sentences, and five stories are a single sentence long. Two are merely sentence fragments. The latter include the title story, 'Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:'. When the title is taken together with the body, 'that Scotland has so few trees' (*SJ* 44), the two may form a complete sentence. Titles often perform a crucial function in Minimalist writing, as demonstrated in Robert Grenier's poetry in Chapter 2 and in Mary Robison's *Why Did I Ever*, as discussed in Chapter 3. The colon in the title of Davis's story complicates the issue of whether the title plus body can be read as a complete sentence. Without the colon, the two elements do form a complete sentence. With it, the sentence is grammatically incorrect.

It seems unlikely that Davis included the colon by mistake. She grew up in a home in which words and art, literature and language, were given great importance. Her father and mother were both academics, and both were published authors of fiction. She describes them as being 'hyperconscious of language', and possessing a 'concern for accuracy' that is reflected in Davis's own explicit treatment of grammar in her stories and in her precision of phrasing. Her work as a translator has no doubt also influenced her concern with accuracy and precision in language.<sup>574</sup> One can only conclude that the colon in 'Samuel Johnson' is

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<sup>573</sup> References to Davis's three most recent collections of stories will appear in parentheses in the text abbreviated as follows: *Break It Down* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996; first published in New York by Knopf, 1986): *BID*; *Almost No Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997): *ANM*; *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (New York: McSweeney's, 2001): *SJ*.

<sup>574</sup> The concern with precision and accuracy is of course one that she shares with Carver, as well as Pound and Hemingway.

placed there deliberately, and that its function is to serve as a link, indicating that the body text follows directly on from the title.

The other fragmentary story in *Samuel Johnson* also features a colon, but in this case it is in the story proper, at the end, and leads on to nothing. The text of 'Certain Knowledge from Herodotus' (14) reads

These are the facts about the fish in the Nile:

This is a story that, on the one hand, has no closure, but on the other, leads to the ultimate closure by referring to nothing, to a null category, emptiness. Hemingway said that 'all stories, if continued far enough, end in death',<sup>575</sup> and perhaps Davis's conclusion in nothingness suggests one way 'Certain Knowledge' may be seen as a narrative. 'Certain Knowledge' was first published as one of 'Seven Considerations' in the little magazine *Noon*.<sup>576</sup> There, a comma appears in the title, so that it reads 'Certain Knowledge, from Herodotus'. This version stresses the general nature of what is being asserted, as if Herodotus is merely serving as an example rather than as the sole and primary subject of the story. There is no certain knowledge, Davis seems to be telling us, but the human struggle to find it is nevertheless a prominent theme in her fiction.

Two of the single-sentence stories in *Samuel Johnson* are primarily concerned with grammar. 'A Double Negative' (66) also has other content:

At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child.

Although the issues of whether or not to have children and the worry that one may have left it too late are poignant ones, the title directs the focus to the grammatical or logical construction of the sentence. The repetition of words forces the reader to

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<sup>575</sup> Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, p. 110.

<sup>576</sup> Davis, 'Seven Considerations', *Noon* 4 (2004).

attend carefully to what is being said in order to make sense of it. The two negatives do not seem to add up to a positive. The point is to make a distinction between wanting a child, and not wanting not to have or have had one. These are different states of desire, and should be recognised and classified as such. Nevertheless, the situation of the character is a difficult one that many of us can recognise, having known those who have experienced it. Davis is highly adroit at combining emotional concerns with a close focus on a system (such as logic or grammar) within the scope of a Minimalist form, and further examples of her skill will appear in this chapter.

Another single-sentence story is less personal in subject matter. 'Honoring the Subjunctive' (*SJ* 71) reads:

It invariably precedes, even if it do not altogether supersede, the determination of what is absolutely desirable and just.

Here Davis describes, while also giving an example of, the subjunctive mood. Her subject is grammar itself. Davis honours the subjunctive simply by using the relatively uncommon form correctly, but she also lauds its function in introducing that which is 'absolutely desirable and just'. Of course, the hypothetical nature of statements in the subjunctive makes the just and desirable mere hopes, but Davis's story suggests that, as a grammatical form that allows for the expression of what is good, it should be honoured. On the other hand, one must question Davis's claim that the subjunctive 'invariably precedes' that which is desirable and just, for the determination lies with he or she who employs the form.

Donald Barthelme's 'Sentence' is an example of a *non*-Minimalist story that purports to consist of only one sentence. In Barthelme's 'Sentence' the story form is not reduced to a single sentence; rather, what seems to be a sentence is *expanded* to story length. By continually inserting clauses, Barthelme stretches the

sentence far beyond its usual boundaries. In structure, however, Barthelme's metafictional story is not a full sentence, and the final realisation of its lack of grammatical status comes at the end, where there is no full stop. It begins, as it were, *in medias res*, with the conjunction 'Or':

Or a long sentence moving at a certain pace down the page aiming for the bottom—if not the bottom of this page then of some other page—where it can rest, or stop for a moment to think about the questions raised by its own (temporary) existence, which ends when the page is turned, or the sentence falls out of the mind that holds it (temporarily) in some kind of an embrace, not necessarily an ardent one, but more perhaps the kind of embrace enjoyed (or endured) by a wife who has just waked up and is on her way to the bathroom in the morning to wash her hair, and is bumped into by her husband,<sup>577</sup>

And so forth, for another six pages. Because of the opening conjunction, it is never quite clear what the grammatical subject of the sentence is, or whether there is one. There seems to be no main verb, either, and this becomes an explicit topic a page from the end. There, we find a 'he', an amorous doctor or psychiatrist,

worrying about the sentence, about its thin wires of dramatic tension, which have been omitted, about whether we should write down some natural events occurring in the sky (birds, lightning bolts), and about a possible coup d'état within the sentence, whereby its chief verb would be<sup>578</sup>

at which point there is an interruption.

The worry about the omissions in the sentence can be construed as a worry that it will be mistaken as Minimalist. Previously, there was an expression of disdain for the pared-down sentence. The sentence has been persuaded to

follow its star, and to move with all deliberate speed from one place to another, without losing any of the 'riders' it may have picked up just by being there, on the page, and turning this way and that, to see what is over there, under that oddly shaped tree, or over there, reflected in the rain barrel of the imagination, even though it is true that in our young manhood we were taught that short,

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<sup>577</sup> Donald Barthelme, *Forty Stories* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1988), p. 157.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.



punchy sentences were best (but what did he mean? doesn't 'punchy' mean punch-drunk? I think he probably intended to say 'short, punching sentences,' meaning sentences that lashed out at you, bloodying your brain if possible [...]) we are mature enough now to stand the shock of learning that much of what we were taught in our youth was wrong<sup>579</sup>

The implication is that the Minimalist aesthetic of Hemingway has been rejected and replaced by an accumulative mode.<sup>580</sup>

In a sense, Davis and Barthelme are addressing the same challenge, that of how to write a story with only one sentence.<sup>581</sup> Barthelme's answer is that it can't be done. His effort to fit a story into a sentence stretches it so far that it is broken and no longer classifiable as a sentence. While Barthelme adds and expands, Davis reduces.

It is true that Davis's sentences are not always Minimalist in construction, and some of her one-sentence stories are rather longer than what might be called normal length. Others, for example, 'The Outing' (*ANM* 179), are not actually complete sentences:

An outburst of anger near the road, a refusal to speak on the path, a silence in the pine woods, a silence across the old railroad bridge, an attempt to be friendly in the water, a refusal to end the argument on the flat stones, a cry of anger on the steep bank of dirt, a weeping among the bushes.

'The Outing' adopts the conventional punctuation of a sentence, an initial capital and a final full stop, between which is the narration of the emotional events of a day. Davis has said that 'with great writers generally [the] basic unit is the

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., p. 159. No ellipsis in original.

<sup>580</sup> Barthelme seems to refer to Hemingway in talking of 'short, punchy sentences' and macho behaviour. Hemingway's urge to tell all, to write a book that has 'everything in it' (*Death in the Afternoon* 237), is also echoed in Barthelme's urge for a sentence that includes whatever it encounters.

<sup>581</sup> Other Minimalist writers, such as Richard Kostelanetz, who will be discussed briefly in the conclusion to this thesis, also take on this task.

phrase',<sup>582</sup> and certainly the phrase is highlighted here, as it is in 'This Condition' (ANM 118-119), which begins 'In this condition: stirred not only by men but by women, fat and thin, naked and clothed', and ends just over a page later:

anything opening; any stream of water running, any stream  
spurting, any stream spouting; any cry, any soft cry, any grunt;  
anything going into anything else, as a hand searching in a purse;  
anything clutching, anything grasping; anything rising, anything  
tightening or filling, as a sail; anything dripping, anything  
hardening, anything softening.

Davis's story does consist of a long list, but it remains narrowly focused on that list, whereas Barthelme's 'majestic and high-minded sentence' (or is it an 'infected sentence'?)<sup>583</sup> has multiple digressions, allusions, and interruptions.

The passage from 'This Condition' quoted above features a run of phrases that are reminiscent of Stein in their insistent repetition, and Davis has been compared with Stein. As one writer noted, 'Davis's precise iteration at the expense of plot and characterization recalls the technique and voice of Gertrude Stein, although Davis is economical while Stein is a self-indulgent spendthrift'.<sup>584</sup> Davis claims to have read little Stein. She is often asked whether Stein was an important influence, but avoids reading her, 'probably because I'm worried it will be too close to something I am already doing'.<sup>585</sup>

Like Stein, Davis is preoccupied with grammar, but employs it in different ways. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Stein eventually shifted her focus from the paragraph and the sentence to that of the individual word, which she highlighted by means of grammatical disruption. Davis is interested in the phrase, and in the sentence as a unit of logical expression. In 'A Double Negative' and 'Honoring

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<sup>582</sup> Davis, 'Broaching Difficult Dahlberg', *Conjunctions* 29 (Fall 1997), pp. 357-371

<sup>583</sup> Barthelme, pp. 161, 163.

<sup>584</sup> Virginia M. Kouidis, 'Editors' Comment', *Southern Humanities Review* 33:1 (Winter 1999), p. iii.

<sup>585</sup> McCaffery, p. 67.

the Subjunctive' Davis adheres to grammatical forms, whereas Stein sought to subvert them.

Despite the fact that she insists on being identified as a short story writer, Davis delights in testing the limits of genre by formal means. She is interested in 'confusing the distinctions' between poem and story, and in fiction that 'enters other genres at the same time, so that a text can be partly autobiography, partly fiction, partly essay, and partly technical treatise'.<sup>586</sup> This tendency to sow confusion regarding genre should not be taken as an indication that she considers issues of genre unimportant. The question of how one determines whether or not a composition is of a particular genre is germane to the concern with 'the essential' in Minimalism. As I said in the introduction to this thesis, Minimalists often use reduction in order to determine the minimum conditions for being a work of literature, or a work of a particular type or genre. We might ask whether the fact that Davis considers herself a short story writer is sufficient cause for her compositions to be classified as stories.

Otherwise, it is difficult to see in what way a story like 'Certain Knowledge from Herodotus' meets any of the accepted criteria for a story, and how it can be distinguished from, for example, a one-line poem such as Grenier's 'NO MORE BREAD ON THE END OF THE TABLE' which consists of the single line 'what's that I hear being sung'.<sup>587</sup> 'Certain Knowledge' appears in a book whose cover declares that it contains 'Stories'. Does this declaration, whether on the part of the author or the publisher, serve as a minimal condition on

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<sup>586</sup> McCaffrey, p. 76.

<sup>587</sup> Rachel Barenblat, in an essay that asks the question 'Prose Poems or Microfiction?' and uses Davis as an example, claims that 'the line between the prose poem and the short-short [story] is invisible, if not nonexistent'. *Web del Sol*, <http://webdelsol.com/InPosse/barenblat.htm>, accessed 22 July 2000.

which the works in it can *be* stories? Or, as I have suggested, does the conclusion of 'Certain Knowledge' in nothingness, and hence metaphorically in death, meet a minimal criterion of narrative, and thus satisfy the condition to be a story?

However one decides to answer these questions, the fact is that Davis addresses questions such as generic status in her stories by reducing them. Sometimes her work takes a metafictional turn in which the nature of the story becomes an explicit thematic concern; this will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

Although Davis's shortest stories are found in *Samuel Johnson*, the book also includes six stories that range between fourteen and twenty pages and are considerably longer than the overall average of fewer than four pages.<sup>588</sup> The longest among them, 'In a Northern Country', first appeared in *The Thirteenth Woman* in 1976, and so comes from an era in which Davis's Minimalism was still at a fledgling stage. Three of the others are Minimalist in other ways. 'Jury Duty' is structured as a question-and-answer session in which the questions are blank, though their place is marked by a 'Q.' The story is reduced to only the answer portion of the exchange. Two of the other long stories in the book, 'Old Mother and the Grouch' and 'Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman', are divided into sections, a common Minimalist strategy in which a story is reduced to its constituent units. In the case of the former, the units are episodes that illustrate a relationship; in the latter they function like mini-chapters in the story of the scientist's life.

Atomisation or dividing into sections is a device that Davis shares with Mary Robison, as mentioned previously. Davis breaks her stories into units that

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<sup>588</sup> *Samuel Johnson* has fifty-six stories in 201 pages. Just under half of the stories are one page or less (including the one-sentence and fragmentary stories mentioned above).

reflect some sort of logical or structural organisation. This is a form of Minimalism of unit that reveals the skeletal structure of the work as something essential to it, although the organising principle varies from story to story. Davis's 'Interesting' consists of seven discrete sections in which people are said to be interesting—or not. Each statement is then qualified in some way: 'My friend is interesting but he is not in his apartment' (*SJ* 48). Here, the overarching concept of what makes a person interesting is minimised<sup>al</sup> into statements describing discrete examples. 'Cockroaches in Autumn' (*BID* 84-87) has a similar structure, with twenty sections of no more than a few lines each. In this story, a series of images is presented without a traditional narrative structure linking them; they are joined solely by their shared subject. Each section is a carefully wrought observation of one aspect of the insects' behavior or a person's reaction to them. The economical structure has a poetic effect. By isolating each observation, Davis achieves a more intense cumulative result than would be the case had she adopted a linear narrative. Each individual observation is presented as valid in its own right.

Davis sometimes divides her prose into slightly longer units, as in 'Liminal: The Little Man' (*BID* 14-19), which has some sections of more than a page. In 'Story' the point of the division into two parts is to separate an account of events from the narrator's attempt to interpret them. Davis's sections are frequently numbered, and even when they are not, an enumerative structure can be implied by titles like 'Five Signs of Disturbance' and 'A Few Things Wrong with Me' (*BID* 165-177, 91-98). In certain cases, for example in 'Television', numbered sections contain smaller, unnumbered units. Davis also effectively

employs section headings or titles to divide her stories and to increase available meaning with a minimal expenditure of words.

'Television' consists of three sections unrelated save by their collection under a single title and their common subject.<sup>589</sup> Each section could conceivably stand alone. It is as if Davis is presenting various partial musings on the topic in the hope that their complementary relationship will serve to provide an entire, cohesive statement. The goal is 'certain knowledge', and the analytical method in which the subject is divided up for closer consideration is designed to serve that goal.

One of Davis's most successful uses of numbered divisions is in 'The Family.' Just over two pages long, 'The Family' consists almost entirely of a sequence of forty-seven actions, most of which are not even allotted an entire sentence. The tone is flat, emotionless, and reportorial, perhaps resembling that of an anthropologist observing the social interactions of a family from another culture. The point of this story seems to be to demonstrate how a minimalist approach in which bare statement of events predominates still manages to yield information regarding emotional attachments and human interaction. In brief, fragmented, objective descriptions such as '(41) White woman carrying baby walks away with young black man and two girls while (42) older white man follows, holding crying black boy by hand' (*ANM* 80-81), we see at work the complex structures and bonds that form so many contemporary families. Although there is no evidence that Hemingway served as a model for Davis, what she has done in this story accords with one of his rules of writing. Each of Davis's numbered sections represents a 'sequence of motion and fact', and although no

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<sup>589</sup> Davis, 'Television', *Conjunctions* 11 (1988), pp. 8-11.

emotion is described, there is an emotional effect. Though the events are described in a cold way, the experience of family interactions is a common one on which readers can draw; we know that the feelings of the people involved do not match the clinical description.

‘What You Learn’, ‘Mr. Burdoff’s Visit to Germany’, ‘Extracts from a Life’, ‘Lord Royston’s Tour’, and ‘Marie Curie’ exemplify Davis’s use of titles in conjunction with division into small sections. The headings in ‘What You Learn’ often repeat words or phrases in the text below them, emphasising the theme. Some of the headings in this story about first-time motherhood serve to organise the material. The section title ‘Odd Things You Notice about Him’ is followed by a series of statements or observations about the baby, most of which do not take the form of full sentences, as with ‘When he yawns, how the wings of his nose turn yellow’ and ‘The white fuzz that collects in his armpit’.<sup>590</sup> The heading provides a context within which these can be comprehended as complete sentences.

‘Mr. Burdoff’s Visit to Germany’ is, at least in part, arranged into narrative components by section titles. It begins with ‘The Undertaking’ and ‘The Situation’, and ends with ‘Summary’. In between are more humorously devised titles. ‘Mr. Burdoff Takes Helen Behind a Statue’ titillates with the promise of a sexual encounter, which it does indeed relate (*BID* 31-38). Some of the section headings in ‘Marie Curie’, such as ‘Preface’, ‘Conclusion’, and ‘Postscript’ are also structural (*SJ* 99-118). As such, they illustrate how the atomisation of a story can highlight its functional components, or like an X-ray, reveal a skeleton. In all these stories, breaking the text into sections allows Davis to focus on the essence

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<sup>590</sup> Davis, From ‘What You Learn’, in Laura Chester (editor), *Cradle and All: Women Writers on Pregnancy and Birth* (Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 231.

of a particular event, experience, or idea, and the titles crystallise the result of the analysis. In general, Davis's tendency to break her stories down is a method of experimenting with ways of conveying meaning and with story structure, and a means for making the structure visible.

Davis's tone is one of the most noticeable features of her writing. The rhythm and musicality of Samuel Beckett's language is a model for her in this regard.<sup>591</sup> In interviews, she often mentions the influence of Beckett, whom she claims to have first read at age thirteen, and whose picture she keeps on a bulletin board above her desk.<sup>592</sup> Sentence structure is the chief contributor to the similarity in sound between Beckett and Davis. For example, consider the following from *The Unnamable*:

All this business of a labour to accomplish, before I can end, of words to say, a truth to recover, in order to say it, before I can end, of an imposed task, once known, long neglected, finally forgotten, to perform, before I can be done with speaking, done with listening, I invented it all, in the hope it would console me, help me to go on, allow me to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving, between a beginning and an end, gaining ground, losing ground, getting lost, but somehow in the long run making headway.<sup>593</sup>

Just as Beckett's sentence proceeds by interrupting itself with brief qualifications, and then reverts back to a previous syntactical level, so does Davis's in 'Betrayal':

And it happened that as she grew older still, and more tired, and then still older, and still more tired, another change occurred, and she found that even the mildest sort of companionship, alone together, was now too vigorous to sustain, and her fantasies were limited to a calm sort of friendliness, among other friends, the sort she really could have had with any man, with a clear conscience, and did in fact have with many, who were friends of her husband's

<sup>591</sup> Francine Prose, Interview with Lydia Davis. *Bomb* 60 (Summer 1997). 25 February 2003. <http://www.bombsite.com/archive/davis/>.

<sup>592</sup> See Interviews by McCaffrey, Prose, and Ziolkowski.

<sup>593</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. (London: Calder, 1994), p. 316.



too, or not, a friendliness that gave her comfort and strength, at night, when the friendships in her waking life were not enough, or had not been enough by the end of the day. (SJ 5)

The way the sentence is put together reveals not only a close attention to its structure, but also sensitivity to its sound. 'I hear the rhythms of the sentence,'<sup>594</sup> Davis says, but the sound is not that of her own speaking voice, which would interfere with the sound of the words on the page. So although there is a distinct voice in Davis's writing, one that is meant to be heard, it is to be heard only in the head.

Despite the musicality of her writing, Davis's language is often described as 'flat.'<sup>595</sup> Her sentences seem to be constructed so that they end with a note of finality. Benjamin Weissman has remarked that she works by 'piling each word like a rock to form a wall of subtle strangeness'.<sup>596</sup> The last word of each sentence comes down with a clunk. For example, consider the opening of 'Mothers': 'Everyone has a mother somewhere' (*BID* 79). There is no qualification in this sentence; what we have is briefly stated as a matter of fact. 'Everyone' is echoed by 'somewhere' in that both are compound words including a quantifying element and an indeterminate indicator. Davis tends to eschew slang and colloquialisms, and chooses to repeat words and phrases rather than to vary them by substituting synonyms. Her language is so plain as to be remarkable. Marjorie Perloff calls it 'at once totally familiar and yet rigidly defamiliarized'.<sup>597</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> Knight, Interview, 457.

<sup>595</sup> Davis played piano, and had an intense interest in music when she was young. See Prose, Interview.

<sup>596</sup> Benjamin Weissman, Review of *Almost No Memory*, *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, July 27, 1997, p. 7.

<sup>597</sup> Perloff, 'Fiction as Language Game: The Hermeneutic Parables of Lydia Davis and Maxine Chernoff', *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 211.

One result of the predominantly flat tone of Davis's stories is that any deviations from it are more striking. Such variation is what Michael Griffith calls Davis's 'surest skill'.<sup>598</sup> 'What I Feel' provides an example of this method at work. Early sentences in this brief story include: 'These days I try to tell myself that what I feel is not very important'; 'I would like to believe it more deeply'; and 'What a relief that would be'. Then, suddenly, the narrator launches into what she sees as the result of believing that what she feels is not important:

I wouldn't have to say, Oh, I feel so awful, this is like the end for me here, in this dark living room late at night, with the dark street outside under the streetlights, I am so very alone, everyone else in the house asleep, there is no comfort anywhere, just me alone down here, I will never calm myself enough to sleep, never sleep, never be able to go on to the next day, I can't possibly go on, I can't live, even through the next minute. (ANM 150)

The hysterical, distraught, lamenting tone of this single-sentence passage contrasts starkly with its frame, and with most of the stories that accompany it in *Almost No Memory*. But although the story is serious, Davis succeeds in eliciting amusement by the contrast she presents. Not only does the tone here resemble that of Beckett, but Davis also seems to allude to the ending of *The Unnamable* with the phrase 'I can't possibly go on'. The shift in tone in 'What I Feel' is employed to make us not only think about the ways we deal with the common demon of despair, but also to allow us to laugh at it and ourselves, to give us relief from the sometimes overwhelming burden of despondence.

I have said that Davis, like Carver and Robison, frequently uses a first-person narrator. Her narrators are developed as characters by means of the voice. Through it, Davis finds both her subject matter and her method. The voice of the narrator, which is to be heard in the head of the reader, may also be the voice in

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<sup>598</sup> Michael Griffith, 'On the Trail of the New Newness: Fiction in Review', *The Southern Review* 24:3 (Summer 1998), p. 593.

that character's head. Perhaps the narrator is not speaking to a close friend, but to herself or himself. This notion fits well with Davis's remark that 'Sometimes I think what interests me most is the human mind'.<sup>599</sup> By making the focus of her fiction the personal and private processes of the narrator talking or thinking things through, Davis shows the mind in action. The mind's processes are revealed in its attempts to navigate the system of language.<sup>600</sup> The result is Minimalism of material in which language itself, the very medium of the story and of literature in general, becomes the object of attention.

'Go Away' is an example of this principle at work. Here a woman tries to sort out the relationship between her husband's anger, the words he uses to express it, and the hurt those words cause. The words 'Go away and don't come back' hurt her more than the words 'I am very angry at you' would, but she asks, is this because the anger motivating them is different in degree or different in kind? She 'knows' that he does not mean exactly what he says when he tells her to go away and never return, but he has nevertheless chosen words that do mean just that: the conclusion is that 'only the words themselves mean what they say' (*ANM* 120-121). Her effort to understand what the man has said to her has led her to speech-act theory: she ends up having distinguished between utterer's meaning and utterance meaning, having analysed the nature of a linguistic act in general. Still, the sense that she continues to feel hurt and somewhat mystified by his words remains.

'The Letter' is another story in which a woman tries to figure out the relationship between words and meaning or intention. Orderly thought is called into service in various ways in this story, in which a woman receives a letter from

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<sup>599</sup> Knight, 'An Interview with Lydia Davis', p. 530.

<sup>600</sup> One might almost say that Davis reinvents the stream-of-consciousness style in this way.

a lover she has not seen or spoken to in a year. As Kasia Boddy points out, the analysis here is on several levels: of the letter as physical object, of the letter as letter, and, in an act of practical criticism, of the poem that constitutes the body of the letter.<sup>601</sup> One paragraph enumerates the causes of her anger upon first reading the letter in a series of statements taking the form 'she is angry because ...' (*BID* 52-53). In another paragraph, the possible meanings of the letter are listed disjunctively, joined by 'or' (56). But the logic is overwhelmed by the power with which the woman invests the physical signs that make up the words on the page. 'She hangs on those letters with such concentration that for a moment she can feel everything in her, everything in the room too, and in her life up to now, gather behind her eyes as though it all depends on a line of ink slanted the right way and another line rounded as she hopes it is' (55). She is seeking lack of doubt, a clear and distinct idea based upon the ink marks on the page, but her emotional involvement carries her beyond a logical exercise into mysticism.

Characters in both 'Finances' and 'Break It Down' use quantification (unsuccessfully) in an attempt to understand relationships. The common problem of defining equality in a marriage is the subject of 'Finances', which opens 'If they try to add and subtract to see whether the relationship is equal, it won't work' (*SJ* 170). The man in 'Break It Down' has resorted to a financial calculation because the pleasure and pain involved in a love affair are resistant to quantification. 'You can't measure it, because the pain comes after and it lasts longer. So the question really is, Why doesn't that pain make you say I won't do it again? When the pain is so bad that you have to say that, but you don't'. Since he cannot rectify the experience in terms of pleasure and pain, he turns to the process

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<sup>601</sup> Boddy, 'Lydia Davis', p. 220.

of calculating its value in terms of the money he has spent: 'So I'm just thinking about it, how you can go in with \$600, more like \$1,000, and how you can come out of it with an old shirt' (*BID* 30). Obviously, this analysis is no more satisfying.

The idea that a mathematical process may lead to the truth about emotional matters is clearly a faulty one, but Davis's characters persist in their efforts to understand human nature by means of orderly systems such as language, logic, and mathematics. These stories show characters engaged in various forms of analysis, their minds actively seeking a way to make sense of painful experience, to subdue recalcitrant emotions through intellection. Their failure is both touching and apparent, for in it we witness our own struggles. And despite the futility of these attempts, we, like Davis's characters, doggedly pursue understanding by way of systematic analysis. We are doomed to repeat these analyses; it is part of the condition of being human to try to figure things out, Davis tells us.

Rule-bound systems such as grammar, logic, and mathematics are ubiquitous in Davis's fiction. The form of 'Grammar Questions' is generated by an exploration of the correct way to speak about someone while they are dying and after they are dead.

When he is dead, everything to do with him will be in the past tense. Or rather the sentence 'He is dead' will be in the present tense, and also questions such as 'Where are they taking him?' or 'Where is he now?'<sup>602</sup>

The narrator goes on to consider whether the term 'him' is the right one to use after death, or whether 'the body' is more proper. It is eventually revealed that the 'him' in question is the narrator's father, but the focus remains on language. This examination of grammatical issues surrounding the death of a parent is conducted in a dispassionate manner, though feelings with regard to the correctness or

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<sup>602</sup> Davis, 'Grammar Questions', *Harper's Magazine*, August 2002, p. 24.

incorrectness of certain ways of speaking are mentioned: 'I don't know if there is a "he," even though people will say "he is dead." But I see that it feels correct to say "he is dead."'”<sup>603</sup> Despite the fact that the questions are strangely humorous, a clear sense of emotion (sadness, distress, perhaps anger) emerges from this story's ostensibly merely formal analyses.

Davis's work as a translator has had an effect on her fiction. The deep involvement with a text that is required in order to translate it, the careful attention to phrasing and nuances of word choice, must be seen as a factor in Davis's own writing and her ideas about language. In her story 'French Lesson I', Davis writes:

A French *arbre* is not the elm or maple shading the main street of our New England towns in the infinitely long, hot and listless, vacant summer of our childhoods, which are themselves different from the childhoods of French children, and if you see a Frenchman standing on a street in a small town in America pointing to an elm or a maple and calling it an *arbre*, you will know this is wrong. (*BID* 130)

Because 'we really cannot have more than one image behind a word we say' (131), the process of translation is a tricky one that involves choosing words that will evoke associations similar to that in the original language, even if they cannot refer to precisely the same object the author had in mind. As Davis remarks in a note on a translation of Michel Leiris,

The ideal 'translation' would be, along the lines of Borges's 'Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,' one in which every word was matched by the same word in the same language but now not quite the same because written again, by a translator, and, ideally, now understood by its readers, whatever their native language, so that the readers themselves would have been translated into a position to understand.<sup>604</sup>

This principle finds its way into Davis's fiction, in her reluctance to name her characters, give specific place references, or even to provide detailed physical

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

<sup>604</sup> Lydia Davis, 'Note' to a translated selection from 'Biffures (Crossouts)', by Michel Leiris, *Sulfur* 15 (Winter 1986), p. 69.

descriptions of things and characters. The avoidance of specificity is designed to involve the reader in the story, to allow the reader to relate the story to his or her own experience, to 'translate' the reader 'into a position to understand'. As did Hemingway, Davis uses reduction to allow the reader to engage with the story on the basis of what he or she already knows.

Although 'French Lesson I' emphasises the role of the context in determining the meaning of a word, there is evidence that Davis dismisses approaches to word meaning that allow for excessive instability. She pokes fun at such approaches in 'To Reiterate' (ANM 83):

Michel Butor says that to travel is to write, because to travel is to read. This can be developed further: To write is to travel, to write is to read, to read is to write, and to read is to travel. But George Steiner says that to translate is also to read, and to translate is to write, as to write is to translate and to read is to translate. [...] But if [...] if to read is to translate, and to translate is to write, to write to travel, to read to travel, to write to read, to read to write, and to travel to translate; then to write is also to write, and to read is also to read, but also travel, and because traveling read, therefore read and read; and when reading also write, therefore read; therefore read, read, read, and read. The same argument may be made for translating, traveling, and writing. (ANM 83)

The point of Davis's *reductio ad absurdum* seems to be that surely to read, to write, to travel, and to translate are verbs that refer to separate activities. To claim that they are interchangeable is to descend into a whirlpool of confusion. The ability to make sense depends on relative stability of reference in language.

Breaking things down into smaller units is a way for Davis to organize her stories, but one of her themes is the manner in which stories themselves help to organise experience. Stories are structured entities that offer ways of making sense of the mass of facts, events, emotions, and ideas that form the material of human life. Davis's writings about stories involve both the motivation of her characters to

tell stories and meditations on the nature of stories. Some of her titles announce their thematic concern, including *The End of the Story*, 'The Center of the Story,' 'Story,' and 'What Was Interesting.' Her experimentally explicit writings about stories span a number of years. Davis's fascination is not just with stories, however, but with 'storyness'. She has remarked, 'I guess it just simply doesn't interest me to tell a story and then to tell another story and tell another story'.<sup>605</sup> Instead, she is engaged in a 'philosophical investigation' into matters that include the question of what a story is. This investigation is carried out in part as the result of a writer's painstaking thought about her craft, and her fiction displays her interest in the issue of what makes a story in both content and form.

'The Universal Lady,' published in *The Thirteenth Woman* in 1976, cannot get beyond a traditional storytelling opening before being sidetracked into analytical questioning of it:

There once was a woman. But was she really there, or was she perhaps some place else at the same time? And if she was there, was she there once or often, once or for a continuing period of time? And if indeed she was, exactly how was was she? And was she a woman, or the woman, or the only woman? (29)

The words 'there once was a woman' do not, for Davis, become simply an opaque formula that one utters and goes beyond, that one uses without scrutinising it intensely. The entire one-paragraph story consists of this process in which each term is analysed in turn, and none is accepted without question. 'The Universal Lady' is Minimalist in scale, in form, and in material.

'The Universal Lady' may be an instance of Davis's principle of 'form as a response to doubt' at work. According to Davis,

Doubt, uneasiness, dissatisfaction with writing or with existing forms may result in the formal integration of these doubts by the

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<sup>605</sup> Knight, Interview, pp. 533-534



creation of new forms, forms that in one way or another exceed or surpass our expectations. Whereas repeating old forms implies a lack of desire or compulsion, or a refusal, to entertain doubt or feel dissatisfaction.<sup>606</sup>

Davis's refusal to pass without comment over the formulaic expression 'there once was a woman' registers her doubt and dissatisfaction with storytelling forms, and manifests her desire to create new forms by subjecting the old to examination. This amounts to what Liam Callanan claims is her 'attempt to remake the model of the modern short story,'<sup>607</sup> her effort to 'make it new'. In 'The Universal Lady,' working through that doubt supplies the form of the story itself and initiates a continuing thread in Davis's writing.

One term to describe 'The Universal Lady' would be metafictional. John Barth is well known for his metafictional experiments, especially those in his 1969 collection *Lost in the Funhouse*. The opening story in that book takes a traditional fairy tale beginning as its starting point, as does 'The Universal Lady'. 'Frame Tale' is also similar to 'The Universal Lady' in that it never progresses beyond that beginning. 'Frame Tale' is accompanied by instructions to cut out the strip of paper on which the words are printed (on both sides) and to attach the ends of it together. Since the words of the story read 'ONCE UPON A TIME THERE' on one side, and 'WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN' on the other, when the strip of paper is put together properly it forms an endless loop.<sup>608</sup> Barth's story is certainly Minimalist in scale, form, style, and material. Barth should not be characterised as a Minimalist writer on the basis of this one story, however. His novels are maximalist, if anything, at least in scale: *Giles Goat Boy*, for example, is over 700

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<sup>606</sup> Davis, "Form as Response to Doubt" (excerpt from unpublished manuscript). *HOW(ever)* 4:2 (October 1987). Online archive. 28 February 2003. [http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/print\\_archive/alerts1087.html#form](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/print_archive/alerts1087.html#form).

<sup>607</sup> Liam Callanan, Review of *Almost No Memory*, *The New York Times on the Web*, 14 September 1997. <http://www.nytimes.com>.

<sup>608</sup> John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), pp. 1-2.

pages long. And in *Tidewater Tales*, which has 655 pages of dense print and a maximalist, page-long chapter title, Barth pokes fun at Minimalism.

The endless loop of 'Frame Tale' differs from the analytic method of 'The Universal Lady'. Whereas in the related stories in his 1969 collection Barth seems to celebrate the condition of being lost in the funhouse of language, Davis struggles to break free from it, to find a way for language to connect up to something real. In her work, linguistic systems are portrayed as like the 'complicated ritualistic forms' that for William Carlos Williams failed to connect up to reality.<sup>609</sup> Yet she also acknowledges the compelling draw of such forms and systems for those who seek what is true or real. Or, like George Oppen, she believes that 'there are words that mean nothing / but there is something to mean'.<sup>610</sup> Her questioning of the fairy tale opening is an attempt to find the truth in what is being asserted, tongue-in-cheek though it may be. For Barth, such truth is irrelevant, at best.

'The Universal Lady' is the only story in *The Thirteenth Woman* that explicitly treats the nature of storyness and displays the self-conscious analyses found in some of Davis's more mature writings. But by the time *Story and Other Stories* appeared in 1983, these were established features of her work. 'Algebra' describes in the barest possible terms, using letters in place of names, a complicated set of relationships among a group of people. A later version of the story was republished as follows under the title 'Problem' (*BID* 154).

X is with Y, but living on money from Z. Y himself supports W, who lives with her child by V. V wants to move to Chicago but his child lives with W in New York. W cannot move because she is having a relationship with U, whose child also lives in New York, though with its mother, T. T takes money from U, W takes money

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<sup>609</sup> Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, p. 189.

<sup>610</sup> Oppen, From 'The Building of the Skyscraper', *This in Which*, p. 73.

from Y for herself and from V for their child, and X takes money from Z. X and Y have no children together. V sees his child rarely but provides for it. U lives with W's child but does not provide for it.

Davis has referred to her approach in 'Problem' as a 'minimalist treatment' that focuses on a 'pattern of abstractions'.<sup>611</sup> It is easy to imagine someone else fleshing out this schema and expanding it into the form of a novel, but for Davis the story is sufficiently interesting in the sparse logical expression she gives it. Simply puzzling out the pattern of relationships is an interpretative activity. The algebraic form is enough to make a story, she seems to propose in this brief piece, and it is also one in which longing and love (to name only two emotions) remain discernible despite the cold, diagrammatic form in which the relationships are presented.

'Story,' which was later republished in *Break It Down*, is in two parts, a narration of events followed by a separate section in which the narrator engages in a search for the truth in the account she has given. She rehashes possible versions of the events, including what her lover has told her, and discusses their degrees of plausibility, ending with:

Maybe the truth does not matter, but I want to know it if only so that I can come to some conclusions about such questions as: whether he is angry at me or not; if he is, then how angry; whether he still loves her or not; if he does, then how much; whether he loves me or not; how much; how capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling. (*BID* 7)

The ultimate subject of 'Story' is the narrator's quest for truth, or her effort to get the story straight, to sort the events into a coherent and plausible narrative. The events she relates prior to her concluding calculations serve only to make those calculations possible.

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<sup>611</sup> McCaffery, 'Deliberately, Terribly Neutral', p. 78.

Story structure is the overt topic of 'The Center of the Story,' in which a woman writes a story featuring a hurricane, but 'unlike a hurricane, this story has no center' (*ANM* 35). In a Minimalist move, the woman tries to strip the story down to essentials, under the assumption that when there is less of a story, what remains must be central. The narrator goes on to discuss various elements of the story that the woman has decided to leave out, and her reasons for their exclusion. The story is disjointed and inconclusive; the search for the story's center is not fulfilled.

Although in one interview Davis describes the way 'The Center of the Story' is written as a form of 'cheating' when faced with difficulties in composition,<sup>612</sup> other comments suggest that she had reasons for constructing it so. This story is another instance of a new form arising in response to doubts about the efficacy of the old. Davis seems to have in mind the process used in 'The Center of the Story' when she says that

To work deliberately in the form of the fragment can be seen as stopping or appearing to stop a work closer, in the process, to what Blanchot would call the origin of writing, the center rather than the sphere. It may be seen as a formal integration into the form itself, of a question about the process of writing.<sup>613</sup>

As with 'The Universal Lady', in 'The Center of the Story' we see thought about what is essential to stories performing an innovative function.

'What Was Interesting' is less tightly focused on the process of writing than stories like 'The Universal Lady' and 'Killed by Monotony'; nevertheless, writing appears there as an additional subject that also serves to facilitate the structure. The problem this time is to find what is interesting in a story, but the story itself, told through the mediating device of discovering what in it is

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<sup>612</sup> Prose, Interview.

<sup>613</sup> Davis, 'Form as Response to Doubt'.

interesting, is a more or less cohesive narrative. The story is allowed to share the focus with the story of its own construction. This is evident in the ending: ‘this anger of hers, lasting so long, was certainly more interesting to her, because in the end she found it harder to explain, than the fact that she had loved him so long’ (ANM 76). The woman’s retrospective view of the situation, her memory of it, provides a lens through which the events are seen, but the lens itself is also made visible.

Davis’s 1995 novel *The End of the Story* is Minimalist in style, but not in scale, form, unit, or material. The novel (Davis’s only one to date) does, however, take as one of its primary subjects the question of what is essential to a novel or a story. Memory plays a prominent role in *The End of the Story*, a principal theme of which is the relationship between a story and its novelistic rendering. Davis begins her novel—and the narrator ends her story—with ‘the taste in my mouth of some cheap, bitter tea brought to me by a stranger’.<sup>614</sup> This ‘ceremonial act’ (231) is vaguely Proustian; however, it does not aid the narrator by bringing unbidden inspiration through involuntary memory. Davis’s narrator is instead involved in the task of bringing order to bear on her voluntary memories. The order she seeks is narrative, and the ceremonial cup of tea provides her with an end to her story. An account of a woman’s attempt to make sense of an unsuccessful love affair by putting it into novel form, *The End of the Story* is the lengthiest of Davis’s explorations of the nature of stories.

A sense that stories are important to human life is apparent in *The End of the Story*. Davis’s unnamed narrator says she feels compelled to have the story of the affair told, even if she is not the one who writes it (51). Yet she also finds the

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<sup>614</sup> Davis, *The End of the Story* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), p. 9. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text, with the abbreviation *ES* except where the context makes the source clear.

sense of importance strongest while she is actually writing. Writing becomes therapeutic; she links her care and precision in composition to a feeling of peace. 'It had to be written carefully', she says, 'because only if I wrote it carefully could I deliver over my pain into it' (196). A friend of hers has a similar experience with the added thought that, by telling his story, he can make the affair it concerns longer lasting, more permanent.<sup>615</sup> The urge to write such stories is matched by a corresponding 'hunger' on the part of the narrator's friends and colleagues, 'especially for stories involving emotion and drama, especially love and betrayal' (61).

The narrator's memories are her raw material, and she must impose order upon them to shape them into story form. She has only fragmentary images of her former lover, the 'lost man' she refers to when people ask what her novel is about (171, 11). He is the absent centre around which she is trying to form an impression that she knows will not be a close enough likeness, a process likened to 'some example from the natural world in which the living thing dies and then leaves a husk, sheath, carapace, shell, or fragment of rock casing imprinted with its form that falls away from it and outlasts it' (171). Although she is 'not willing to invent much', and thinks that she can 'use only the elements of the actual story' (198), she admits that her version of the story leaves certain things out, and that she is 'shifting the truth around a little'. In doing so, she is serving a narrative interest: 'I am rearranging what actually happened so that it is not only less confusing and more believable, but also more acceptable or palatable' (106).

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<sup>615</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

Like so many of Davis's characters, the narrator is obsessed with order and classification.<sup>616</sup> Yet, also like those other characters, she often fails in her efforts to subject her memories and what she sees and experiences to a system. She thinks that she *should* be able to classify the spiders she observes according to various features of their appearance and behaviour, but this remark is made precisely because she has not succeeded in doing so. Rather comically, she tries to sort her writings into clearly labelled boxes. But she falters from the start, her efforts thwarted by a strange combination of superstition and excessive attention to the way in which the titles are written. One version, she worries, may bring bad luck, and the addition of parentheses and punctuation marks only adds to her problem by the shades of meaning they introduce (119). The joke continues when, after a short time, she returns to this material, 'but when I sat down at my desk I was immediately confused by my new system' (125). It is no wonder that she finds the order of her book the most difficult thing, surpassed only by her doubt, and that her 'doubt about the order has been the worst' (82).

She persists in the belief that a system of order will somehow increase the value of what she is doing (217), will help it to make sense (51). The issue is ultimately one of narrative coherence. But narrative order does not necessarily coincide with chronological order. She registers doubt in the traditional form based on chronological order, which doubt perhaps will lead her to the creation of a new form. 'Is it that when these events are in chronological order they are not propelled forward by cause and effect, by need and satisfaction, they do not spring ahead with their own energy but are simply dragged forward by the passage of

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<sup>616</sup> In this and in her need to deal with painful issues by putting them into a carefully constructed verbal form, Davis's narrator seems to resemble Mary Robison's Money Breton.

time?’ (99). The suggestion here is that some other order, logical or psychological, but not chronological, subtends narrative.

The search for the proper narrative order is, of course, one of the primary subjects of Davis’s book, and despite the rejection of chronological order, the narrator insists that there be a beginning, middle, and end. Although these elements are necessary for her memories and writings to become a story (198), she makes a distinction between the story itself and the novel; the ceremonial cup of tea may be the end of the story, but it comes at the beginning of the novel (11). The relationship between these elements, despite what their names suggest, is not strictly chronological, but is based on a spatial structure of meaning<sup>617</sup>: ‘the beginning didn’t mean much without what came after, and what came after didn’t mean much without the end’. Because of this, the narrator wants ‘all the parts of the story to be told at the same time’ (11).

Clearly then, the story in some sense forms a whole, is a complete unit. But there is ambiguity about the question of whether the story pre-exists in this whole form, with a beginning, middle, and end, or whether these things are somewhat arbitrarily imposed on it by the author. The novel ends with the narrator’s statement that ‘since all along there had been too many ends to the story, and since they did not end anything, but only continued something, something not formed into any story, I needed an act of ceremony to end the story’ (231). Elsewhere, though, there are hints that the story follows its own order, and is an entity not entirely dependent on the narrator’s formulation of it; the issue of the location of the beginning, middle, and end of the story is related to the question of the nature and origin of stories.

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<sup>617</sup> The idea of ‘spatial form’ in literature will be discussed briefly in the next chapter.



The narrator at one point thinks that work on the novel should be easy, since she ‘knew the story already’ (50), as if the story is not something she is creating, but something that exists and that she must find the correct expression for. A much stronger version of this idea occurs later, when she says that ‘many parts of the story either refused to be told or demanded to be told in only one way’. She does not have a choice regarding her vocabulary

or anything else, and in fact the novel had to be just this long, leave out this much, include this much, change the facts this much, have this much description, be precise here but vague there, literal here but metaphorical there, use complete sentences here but incomplete sentences there, an ellipsis here but none there, contracted verbs here but not there, etc. (192)

Similarly, she refers to the novel as a puzzle, and her work as a search for the solution (87). To find the solution, she must discover what belongs to the story and what does not: what she leaves out ‘would make another story, or even several others, quite different in character from this one’ (61). In the end, though, it seems that despite the demands it makes on her, the story depends upon the narrator putting it into novel form for its existence. No one else can know whether the solution she has proposed to the puzzle is the correct one, and it is possible that there is some ‘other novel, the one that should have been written, [and] will never be written’ (87).

Davis’s investigation of the nature of the story in *The End of the Story* indicates that she takes the issue very seriously. Despite the humour with which she sometimes treats the subject, and despite her remark in an interview that she doubts ‘that writing helps *anyone* to live’,<sup>618</sup> she obviously deems stories worthy of attention. Stories serve important functions in human life, they are part of our reality, and so deserve to be included in what she sees as the ‘higher value’ in her

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<sup>618</sup> McCaffery, ‘Deliberately, Terribly Neutral’, p. 79.

writing, her philosophical 'investigation of reality'.<sup>619</sup> This is not achieved by simply telling stories, but by subjecting the form of stories to doubt, by questioning their nature and analysing them in the act of writing, in the stories themselves.

The elusive nature of the self is another persistent and pervasive theme in Davis's writing. That the self exists is an idea necessary for us to get on with daily life, Davis has remarked, 'but as soon as you start looking at things more carefully, they start to disappear'. The question of the nature of the 'I' is, she says, one 'that particularly haunts me'.<sup>620</sup> She probes the question of how we know who and what we and others are from a variety of perspectives and with characteristic wit and pathos. Although her stories and passages on this subject are never lengthy, Davis's talent reveals itself in her ability to plunge deeply, quickly, to the heart of the matter. The effect is often startling and revelatory.

The discrepancy between our own sense of identity and how others perceive us is given a humorous slant in 'What She Knew', in which a young woman is surprised to find that a young man is flirting with her because she knows what others do not: 'that she was not really a woman but a man, often a fat man, but more often, probably, an old man' (*BID* 39). That she is an old man is called a 'fact', thus calling into question the status of a fact, since this fact is clearly at odds with the identifying pronoun 'she'. Is she wrong about her identity, or has there been some sort of linguistic mistake? Her description of herself as an old or fat man implies certain physical characteristics. It is surprising that a young man would flirt with an old, fat man. The ludicrous situation in this Minimalist

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<sup>619</sup> Knight, 'An Interview with Lydia Davis', p. 534.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 532.

story, which consists of one brief paragraph, provokes amusement. It nonetheless contains a shrewd observation of the way self-image and outward appearance can diverge, and furthermore raises the issue of which of the two is genuine.

Language often plays a role in leading people to form ideas about identity. For that very reason, Davis avoids assigning names to her characters, or even to places. In *The End of the Story*, the narrator discusses choosing names for the characters representing her lover and herself in the novel she is writing. She rejects name after name because she associates each with certain personality traits, and none seems just right (41-42). She became involved with the young man in question before she was sure of his name, but once discovered, it 'seemed to increase his reality. It gave him a place in the world that he had not had before, and it allowed him to belong more to the day than he had before' (37). It is as if the name gives him a secure position in an orderly system, that of language, in which things and people are classified, and are easier to comprehend, *seeming* more 'real' once a label has been attached to them. The novel's narrator also mentions seeing men who resemble her former lover, and imagining seeing one who corresponds to his physical description 'down to the last detail ... as though all his elements had come together and the only thing needed, to change this man into him, was the right word' (13). That word may be a name, but even names are not always a reliable indication of identity.

Names and titles are a means for Davis to explore the way language connects to the world, the way in which it refers. Titles, such as those associated with professions, can also lead to mistakes about the people they identify. In some ways, perhaps, titles may be like those calcified forms that the Modernists sought to destroy. We tend to have conceptions of what sort of person would fill a certain

role or have a certain designation. But when we realise that we ourselves occupy roles and can be designated in various ways, we often find that we do not fit these conceptions. This is the subject of 'A Position at the University', which serves, in Kasia Boddy's words, to 'examine designated roles and how they contain us'.<sup>621</sup> How can it be, the narrator asks, that she is not the sort of person she would think of as having a position at the university, and yet be true that she does have such a position? A stranger might see her as the sort of person with a university position, but they fail in not taking into account other aspects of her personality. The description the stranger makes is not complete; true and complete knowledge of her would reveal those characteristics at odds with her position and show that she is not contained by the designation.

One can also be wrong in the linguistic designations one applies to oneself. The protagonist of 'Sketches for a Life of Wassilly' thinks of himself as 'a man of good health', despite the fact that, as his sister remarks, he is often ill (*BID* 107-108). He deceives himself about more than just his health, but one day is 'suddenly enlightened', and sees 'that there was a terrible discrepancy between his conception of himself and the reality' (108-109). The problem is that he conceives of himself in terms of possibilities rather than actualities. His romantic dreams of what he might do and be, when seen in contrast with his ineffectual efforts, earn him his name, which Davis has suggested can be broken down into two words that suggest his nature.<sup>622</sup> But his occasional recognition of this makes it difficult not to feel sorry for him: 'When in moments of difficult truth-seeking he saw this incongruity, he felt sick that he should be saddled with himself, as though he were

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<sup>621</sup> Boddy, 'Lydia Davis'.

<sup>622</sup> McCaffery, 'Deliberately, Terribly Neutral', p. 72.

his own unwanted guest' (109). This feeling of being <sup>sick</sup> conflicts with his application of the label 'a man of good health' to himself.

'I am thinking about a friend of mine', opens a story in *Almost No Memory*, 'how she is not only what she believes she is, she is also what friends believe her to be, and even what she is in the eyes of chance acquaintances and total strangers' ('A Friend of Mine' 116). As in the cases of discrepant views of a person's character in 'What She Knew' and 'Sketches for a Life of Wassilly', the title character disagrees with others about her personality traits. The narrator toys with the idea of intersubjective agreement between the woman and her friends as evidence for the reality of the woman's personality traits. But instead she finds 'only contradictions everywhere'. There are temporal factors involved that affect the perceptions of others and destabilize intersubjective judgments—at times she is tidy and at others not—thus jeopardising the basis for determining which of her traits are real. Near the end the narrator remarks that

it occurs to me that I must not know altogether what I am, either, and that others know certain things about me better than I do, though I think I ought to know all there is to know and I proceed as if I do. Even once I see this, however, I have no choice but to continue to proceed as if I know altogether what I am. (117)

This passage marks 'A Friend of Mine' as Davis's most explicit fictional exploration of the nature of the self. In the disjunction it portrays between knowledge and the commonsense assumptions upon which we operate, it addresses one of the most pervasive themes in Davis's fiction.

Sometimes the attempt to understand others and our relationships with them leads to introspective analysis. A woman tries to discover why her lover left her in 'A Few Things Wrong with Me'. In the process, she lists some of the 'wrong conclusions' she has come to about him. When she presses him for

answers, he tells her he didn't like certain things about her from the start. This comes as quite a shock to her, 'but', she says, 'if I try to be logical, I have to think that after all there may be a few things wrong with me. Then the problem is to figure out what these things are' (*BID* 94). Since he is not more specific, she considers the various possibilities, including her habit, unsurprising for a Davis character, of trying to order her life by writing things on index cards. Breaking up experience into small, manageable units is an exercise in reduction and control similar to that of Money Breton in Mary Robison's *Why Did I Ever*. Finally, Davis's narrator wonders whether the question of what is wrong with her is a valid one. It is 'a useless question, really, since I'm not the one who can answer it and anyone else who tries will come up with a different answer, though of course all the answers together may add up to the right one, if there is such a thing as a right answer to a question like that' (98). The attempt to use a mathematical process, that of addition, to find the truth about poignant and troubling human concerns clearly fails here, but Davis's characters persist in their efforts to understand human nature by means of orderly systems such as logic and mathematics.

In other stories, systems of order are invoked in even more extreme attempts to make sense of the self. In two sections of 'Examples of Confusion', reflections lead to reflection, as a woman encounters her own image. 'I think how remote I am', she says, 'if that is me. Then think how remote, at least, that fluttering white thing is, for being me' (*ANM* 181). The confusion here is between her image and her self, but it is facilitated by language, in which one may refer to one's reflected or photographically captured image as 'me'. The confusion comes from a too literal belief in or too trusting a reliance on the system of language. In the next section the woman, who has been drinking, says:

I look at my bare feet on the tiles in front of me and think: Those are her feet. I stand up and look in the mirror and think: There she is. She's looking at you.

Then I understand and say to myself: You have to say *she* if it's outside you. If your foot is over there, it's there away from you, it's *her* foot. In the mirror, you see something like your face. It's *her* face. (181-182)

The mistake here differs from that in the first section; it is the opposite mistake.

But in both cases the woman has the sense that she is operating with a set of linguistic rules to reach a conclusion.

The impossibility of being other than where and other than who one is comes in for analysis in 'From Below, as a Neighbor'. In this one-paragraph story, a woman tries to imagine being a neighbour living below and how she would sound to herself as the neighbour, perhaps as a spur to improve her behaviour or demeanour. 'I would say to myself how glad I was not to be her', she thinks. But this is impossible, because she cannot adopt that perspective on herself. Not only can she not hear herself 'from below, as a neighbor', she cannot be glad that she is not the woman she in fact is: 'I cannot say to myself, as I would have to from below, how glad I am not to be her' (*ANM* 167). Her insistence upon the logical impossibility of hearing and passing judgment upon herself may be a way of avoiding a suggestion that she modify her unpleasant speech and actions. If so, she is being perverse rather than reasonable in adopting a rigidly logical stance; she is confined within her paragraph as well as her flat.

Part of the point of these stories seems to be that excessive dependence upon ordering systems bears the risk of straying into absurdity. This is most obvious in 'Once a Very Stupid Man'. There, a woman in a café sits two tables from where a man with a beard is writing. Then

two loud women came in to have lunch and disturbed the bearded man and she wrote down in her notebook that they had disturbed

the bearded man writing at the next table and then saw that since she herself, as she wrote this, was writing at the next table, she was probably calling herself a bearded man. It was not that she had changed in any way, but that the words *bearded man* could now apply to her. Or perhaps she had changed. (*BID* 140)

Although on the one hand this seems like another example of Davis practicing reduction to absurdity, the woman's insecure sense of identity is worth noting, and may be an example of the existential discomfort Davis has suggested is part of human nature: 'I'm tempted to say we're all very uncomfortable existentially or something in this life'.<sup>623</sup> Although the woman's sense of self, not to mention the physical description combined with the spatial location, should be sufficient to pick out the referent of the phrase in question, she confuses herself regarding her own identity. As in 'Examples of Confusion,' the woman has erred in matching up language to world, but her mistake is, on some level, perfectly logical. Narrowly following this logical chain of thought leads her to entertain the absurd possibility that she is someone else, a bearded man.

In 'Trying to Learn' the logical curiosities of personal identity merge with those of relationships between people. Here a woman experiments with the idea that her husband is really several different men in order to make sense of various aspects of his behaviour and her reactions to them. She analyses him, breaks him down, considers fragments of the whole. Her belief in logic tells her that a patient man acts with patience, a serious man is serious, a playful man teases, and an angry one slams the door; this is at odds with the commonsense idea that one man can display all these behaviours at different times. She knows that she should realise they are all the same—it is this she attempts to learn—but she persists in wanting to treat them differently. She tries to protect the patient man from her

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<sup>623</sup> Kate Moses, "Not Tired of Thinking Yet" (Interview with Lydia Davis). *Salon Magazine* (June 97). 26 February 2003. [www.salon.com/june97/mothers/davis970620.html](http://www.salon.com/june97/mothers/davis970620.html).



anger. Although she tries to convince herself that the different men are in reality one and the same, 'I can only believe I said those words, not to him, but to another, my enemy, who deserved all my anger' (*ANM* 82). The logic has been infected with her conflicting feelings, leaving her unable to reconcile analytical truths with the intuition of commonsense.

'The Dog Man' and 'A Man in Our Town' exemplify Davis's use of the absurd when writing about personal identity. In the first, there are actually two creatures who might be called 'dog men': one is a man who is really a dog, and the other is a dog who is really a man. The dog who is really a man is 'tormented ... sly and furtive and ashamed of himself'. The categories can be further subdivided. 'Another kind of dog who is really a man is like the man who is really a dog in our office, and he does very well because he is really most comfortable as a dog'.<sup>624</sup> In the other story, 'A man in our town is both a dog and its master' (*ANM* 129). He, too, is tormented, and takes out his unhappiness on his dog; 'only sometimes ... he will pet himself on the head until he is comforted' (130). This dog man is not only a composite creature, but is also schizophrenic. In suggesting that some people have identities that are really something preposterous, such as being a dog, Davis succinctly portrays the existential discomfort she believes we all experience. She associates this discomfort with Kafka, and it is possible that her dog stories are inspired to a degree by some of his stories in which the distinction between animal and human is blurred, including 'The Metamorphosis', 'Josephine the Singer', and 'Investigations of a Dog'.<sup>625</sup> Critics and reviewers often note the Kafkaesque quality of her writing, a feature that is most evident in

<sup>624</sup> Davis, 'The Dog Man', *The Paris Review* 97 (Fall 1985), p. 107.

<sup>625</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories and Parables* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1983), pp. 89-139, 360-376, 278-316.

her earlier stories, a number of which are reprinted in *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant*.

Discomfort with one's own sense of identity also comes up in *The End of the Story*. There, the narrator faces a moment of existential dread when she thinks a man has mistaken her for a vagrant. 'I suddenly felt I might be what he thought I was' the woman reports. The problem is that there is no way for her to judge whether his view of her or her own self-perception is the correct one: 'there was an equal choice between what I thought I was, this tired woman asking him for water, and what he thought I was, and there might not be any such thing as the truth anymore, to bind us together' (ES 10). The thought that his perception and hers are logically equal is one that demonstrates the disappearance of the self in the face of analysis that Davis has mentioned. Perhaps the ceremonial cup of tea the man later brings the woman serves not only to mark the end of the story, but as an acknowledgement of the self; it is a gesture of kindness that binds them together, even if the self continues to defy logical attempts at definition. There is a truth as to *who she* is, even if that truth cannot be made to fit into perceptual or logical schemes.

Davis muses over the existential import of memory and its role in defining the self in her essay 'Remember the Van Wagenens'. She marvels over the fact that what a man once said to her has served to help form her self-definition for many years, yet when she meets him again, 'he does not know who this woman in front of him is, and cannot even with all the help in the world revive any image of her as a girl'.<sup>626</sup> Davis rather directly asks, 'One who shares a past with you loses

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<sup>626</sup> Davis, 'Remember the Van Wagenens', *Southern Humanities Review* 33:1 (Winter 1999), pp. 8-9.

his memory: what happens to you?’<sup>627</sup> If one’s identity is at least partially constituted by memory, our own and that of others, then does our identity change along with the loss of memory? If so, the self is profoundly unstable. Still, we resolutely believe in it. Davis’s stories doggedly pursue ways of analysing and defining the self, and although none seems to offer an answer to the question of its true nature, her persistence is ample evidence that she deems the endeavour worthwhile.

Davis describes the form of the short-short story, in which she excels, as that of a ‘parable that doesn’t have a moral,’ a form she explicitly associates with Kafka.<sup>628</sup> She has said that Kafka’s parables and paradoxes inspired her to work in very short forms.<sup>629</sup> Nevertheless, there is a moral dimension to her work. Some stories acknowledge the power of words to wound, and thus the ethical issues inherent in the use of language. The relationship between the intention to hurt and the words that do the hurting is the subject of ‘Go Away’ (*ANM* 120-121), as described above. In ‘The Other,’ the potential for a story to cause more damage even than actions is made clear. With the intent of annoying the person she lives with, a woman repeatedly moves household objects, and the other person repeatedly puts them back in place.

Then she tells all this the way it happens to some others and they think it is funny, but the other hears it and does not think it is funny, but can’t change it back. (*ANM* 115)

That Davis admits there is a moral dimension to language use is further evidence of her realism. Words matter because they do have an effect on, and some

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<sup>627</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>628</sup> Davis, ‘AfterWord’, *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, eds. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1986), p. 230

<sup>629</sup> Peter Terzian, ‘How Proust Changed Her Life: Talking with Lydia Davis’, *Newsday.com*. 4 Nov. 2001. 10 Nov. 2001. <http://www.newsday.com/features/books/ny-bktalk2446651nov04.story>

connection with reality. Their power to wound is based on their very real role in human life.

Like Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Lax, Davis has been inspired and influenced by abstract visual art. That abstraction does not preclude reference to reality was the startling conclusion Davis reached after an encounter with Joan Mitchell's painting *Les Bluets* (The Cornflowers). Davis recounts a visit to Mitchell's studio, probably in 1973 or 1974, in which she saw the painting and enjoyed it as 'what it was, shapes and colors, white and blue'. When she was then told that the painting had a subject, cornflowers, she was shocked. 'Two things happened at once: the painting abruptly went beyond itself, lost its solitariness, acquired a relationship to fields, to flowers; and it changed from something I understood into something I did not understand, a mystery, a problem'. Like so many of her narrators, Davis then embarked on an attempt to 'figure it out', to solve the problem by questioning and analysis. 'Eventually', writes Davis,

I began to find answers to my questions, but they were not complete answers, and after a time I did not feel the need for complete answers, because I saw that part of the force of the painting was that it continued to elude explanation. I became willing to allow aspects of the painting to remain mysterious, and I became willing to allow aspects of other problems to remain unsolved as well, and it was this new tolerance for, and then satisfaction in, the unexplained and unsolved that marked a change in me.<sup>630</sup>

Davis's account of this episode bears exploring, for it touches on several matters that should be considered in judging the significance of her work.

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<sup>630</sup> Lydia Davis, 'Joan Mitchell, *Les Bluets* (The Cornflowers), 1973', *Artforum*, January 1996, p. 73.

As a literary artist, Davis's medium is words rather than the paint used to form shapes and colours. Critics have remarked that Davis handles words like material things. In this she resembles other writers in this thesis such as Williams, Zukofsky, Saroyan, and Grenier. Above I quoted Benjamin Weissman as saying that Davis's craft is like that of a wall builder, 'piling each word like a rock'.<sup>631</sup> Patricia Vigderman has said that Davis, like Michel Leiris, treats 'language itself [a]s concrete, substantial'.<sup>632</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to claim (as neither Weissman nor Vigderman does) that Davis's writing concerns only the level of language itself, that her words have no referent. The narrator of *The End of the Story* attends a poetry reading in which two poets read 'sounds that have no meaning: they were making a kind of music with broken words, syllables'. She finds this poetry unsatisfactory. Later, the poets use words, 'in the same way as the syllables that had no meaning, and maybe they were intended to lose their meaning. But they did not lose it for me' (*ES* 193). Words, for this narrator, and, I would argue, for Davis, simply are essentially referential. And yet it is their referential function, their connection to the world, that seems mysterious and problematic, as the shapes and colours in Mitchell's painting became when linked with an actual scene.

That words are referential by nature does not mean that they lose their material quality, their existence as things in themselves. Instead, as Vigderman explains (again in regard to Leiris), 'mishearings and associations are as much a part of [the] material world as the things they designate'.<sup>633</sup> Davis herself admitted as much in a 1983 review of Clark Coolidge, in which she said that

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<sup>631</sup> Weissman, Review of *Almost No Memory*, p. 7.

<sup>632</sup> Patricia Vigderman, 'Almost No Center', *The Kenyon Review*, n.s. 21, number 2 (Spring 1999), p. 156.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Coolidge is ‘not so much attempting a Dadaist rupture of words and sense as he is forming new associations among words to point to a new referent, or, even, forming a new referent—i.e., changing our “reality”’. Davis goes on to suggest that what Coolidge is changing is the way we look at the world.<sup>634</sup> But the implication is that language and human thought are part of the real. Davis returns to this idea in her 1999 essay on memory, ‘Remember the Van Wagenens’, when, returning to a street where she once lived, she insists that her memory of it is just as real as the physical place now in existence: ‘Both the thing remembered and what is there now exist. Only, one exists only in my brain and the other out there for other people to see, too’.<sup>635</sup> Mental or psychological reality is reality nonetheless, Davis seems to be saying.

This idea connects well with Davis’s ideas on translation. There are personal (and cultural) associations with words that resist translation, but understanding across languages can be achieved. We may picture different mental objects when presented with a word, but our experience has enough in common to allow for communication. This concept gestures toward explaining the sort of realism that lies beneath Davis’s experiments in writing. There are realities, or there is a reality, to which we all have access and in which we all participate. However, our access and participation is necessarily limited, and we cannot comprehend the whole. Our inability to grasp the whole may be what motivates our persistent reliance on Davis’s perennial theme, analysis.

Breaking things down, analyzing them, is a powerful, if imperfect, means of grasping them as a whole. As Davis says,

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<sup>634</sup> Davis, ‘Coolidge’s “Mine”’, *Poetics Journal* 3 (May 1983), p. 94.

<sup>635</sup> Davis, ‘Remember the Van Wagenens’, p. 3.

We can't think of fragment without thinking of whole. The word fragment implies the word whole. A fragment would seem to be part of a whole, a broken-off part of a whole. Does it also imply, as with other broken-off pieces, that enough of them would make a whole, or remake some original whole, some ideal whole?<sup>636</sup>

These remarks recall Hemingway's iceberg theory in some ways. It also echoes the efforts of Davis's characters to understand the nature of the self. The self may be a difficult concept to pin down as a whole; all we can see are aspects of it and this becomes even more apparent when we try to analyse it. Yet we believe and act as if the self is a whole and is something real. Davis's use of analytic procedures does not amount to committing murder to dissect. Instead, her work affirms the value of that which escapes the analytic structure she gives her stories, and reminds us that the importance of people and relationships with others may exceed the reach of the intellect.

The efforts of the narrator of *The End of the Story* to structure her memories of the failed affair into beginning, middle, and end are ways of seeing it as a whole. When painful or confusing events are organised in a narrative form, they are more easily comprehended. Stories may be abstract entities, but they are also devices that help us to understand our world and our experience, and as products of the human mind, they form part of our reality. As linguistic entities made of words, they do refer to real experiences, real aspects of the world, even if the mental reference called to mind in each reader or listener is slightly different. Like the self, stories may exist independently of analysis, and even of the writer, whose participation is necessary to put them into a form that can be perceived by others. Like experimental paintings that can reject literal representation and still

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<sup>636</sup> Davis, "... Without Thinking of Whole ..." (excerpt from a talk given by Lydia Davis, November 20, 1986, at New Langton Arts, San Francisco). *HOW(ever)* 4:2 (October 1987). Online archive. 28 February 2003.  
[http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/print\\_archive/alerts1087.html#form](http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/however/print_archive/alerts1087.html#form).

refer, and in the same way that any poetry using words refers, stories in new forms like those devised by Davis still have meaning.

My point is that Davis's focus on analysis and systems of order, like Mitchell's painting, does not preclude reference to reality. One of Davis's most prevalent leitmotifs is the way people attempt to use abstract systems in an effort to forge some relation with reality, and the way in which those systems and our use of them become part of that reality. But the nature of our human existence is such that we must learn to live with mystery. We must learn that, though our efforts to break things down may help us to understand our world, our knowledge of it cannot be complete, and we must be content to marvel at both the world and at our dogged, logical, systematic, abstract, and fallible attempts to make sense of it.

Williams objected to forms that separated the work from 'reality', and tried to break them in an effort to make language conform more closely to reality. Davis's method is quite different. Her correct use of grammatical forms and logic manages to refer indirectly to a reality that eludes precise classification. Like the Modernists, Davis tries to 'make it new', but she does so by working within and analysing literary and linguistic forms. Her search for what is essential within those systems demonstrates that despite their shortcomings, language and literature do possess the capacity for conveying, even if obliquely, that which we experience as real.



## CHAPTER 6: *David Markson*

The impulse to 'make it new' in American Modernist literature is almost always a matter of *renewing* something that already exists. What that 'something' is takes various forms. For Eliot, it is literary tradition that is revitalised by the new individual talent. Other American Modernists sought to revitalise language through literature. William Carlos Williams speaks of 'words washed clean': he wants not to create completely new words, but to 'get back to' the old ones unencumbered by formulaic habits of expression. The goal is 'a fundamental regeneration of thought in our language' exemplified by the writings of Pound and Stein.<sup>637</sup> The Objectivist project was one of 'writing to say things simply so that they will affect us as new again'.<sup>638</sup> The value of 'sincerity' that informed Objectivism was a refusal of rhetoric that indicates desire for a renewed connection between language and the world. Frederic Henry's rejection of abstract words in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* similarly favoured the reference to actual events in 'the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates'.<sup>639</sup> Hemingway is the 'recorder of authenticities', as Hugh Kenner puts it. The 'one true sentence' on the basis of which he constructs his early stories is something found, not something created; it is there in the world, part of what already exists.<sup>640</sup>

David Markson, who has been called 'our last literary modernist',<sup>641</sup> shares the impulse for renewal, I will argue. Markson's experiments in Minimalism are

<sup>637</sup> Williams, 'A Pound Stein', pp. 162-163, emphasis added.

<sup>638</sup> L. S. Dembo, Interview with Zukofsky, p. 203.

<sup>639</sup> Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, p. 162.

<sup>640</sup> Kenner, *A Homemade World*, p. 145.

<sup>641</sup> Joseph Tabbi, 'David Markson: An Introduction', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 92.

an exercise in renewal of literary tradition, à la Eliot, in that they explicitly (and often implicitly) make reference to that tradition. Although Markson is very much aware of, and frequently invokes, a Western artistic tradition that spans millennia, he also seeks to situate himself as an innovator. In doing so, he allies his literary project with Modernist experimentalism, which he presents as a major tradition within the larger scope of human artistic endeavour. His is an Eliotic model of tradition and innovation, in which new works are informed by those that precede them, but also alter the tradition itself by means of what they introduce to it.

Markson's innovation is to rework the novel so that it is 'Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage', as he puts it in all of his three most recent books. It is no accident that some of the descriptions he adopts come from techniques used in the Modernist revolution in the visual arts. Markson makes frequent reference to artistic experiment in his novels. The following passage from *Vanishing Point* (2004) should give a sense of this, and will serve to illustrate the character of his Minimalist works:

A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak  
minus much of the novel.

This presumably by now self-evident also.

The Egyptians appear never in their history to have enjoyed  
one day of freedom.

Said Josephus, ca. 95 A.D.

Beguiled by the romance of Gaugin's removal to Tahiti.  
Until remembering that the man deserted a wife and four  
young children at home.

I suppose all my books are gone.  
Some, Dilly said. We had to.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>642</sup> David Markson, *Vanishing Point* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), pp. 13-14. Subsequent references to this book will be identified in the text with the abbreviation *VP* where necessary.

The last is of course a quotation from Joyce's *Ulysses*, one of many such unattributed borrowings that appear in *Vanishing Point, Reader's Block* (1996), and *This Is Not a Novel* (2001).<sup>643</sup> Markson has not borrowed in the imitative fashion of an immature poet, according to Eliot's scheme, but has instead appropriated parts of literary works outright. He is a mature novelist who steals.<sup>644</sup>

Markson allies himself most closely with Eliot and Joyce among Modernist authors. I have not identified these two writers as sources of a Minimalist tradition in this thesis, although Eliot's use of allusions can be seen as a reductive strategy. According to I. A. Richards, Eliot's use of allusion to the great works of the tradition is 'a technical device for compression',<sup>645</sup> and it is one that Markson also employs. Nevertheless, as I have suggested, Markson's own distinctive practice has some things in common with the Modernists I have focused on. Markson is concerned with essentials, that which is basic to literature. He wants to renew the connection between author and reader. I will explain Markson's position in more detail in due course. For now, suffice it to say that, like the other writers in this thesis, Markson uses reductive techniques to reveal something at the heart of literature.

Markson's view of Modernism is of a tradition of formal innovation that nonetheless attempts to maintain contact with older works and ideas, and through them to remain 'conversant' with authors and artists of the past. He honours this tradition and seeks to make a place for himself within it. Working primarily with

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<sup>643</sup> *Reader's Block* (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996), and *This Is Not a Novel* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2001). References will be provided in the text with the abbreviations *RB* and *TINN* where necessary.

<sup>644</sup> See T. S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 206.

<sup>645</sup> I. A. Richards, 'The Poetry of T. S. Eliot', *Principles of Literary Criticism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), pp. 290-291.

the genre of the novel<sup>646</sup> as a form that provides a structure to work within and against, Markson engages with literary tradition and seeks to renew it. Ultimately, he chooses Minimalism as the means best suited to affirm the values of innovation, tradition, and the individual artist that characterise Modernism for him.

Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano* made a profound impression upon the young David Markson when he read it in 1949. By 1952, Markson had written a master's thesis on Lowry's novel for a degree from Columbia University. Markson and Lowry began corresponding, and eventually met and became friends.<sup>647</sup> Lowry remained an enthusiasm of Markson's: in 1978, Markson reworked his MA thesis into a book-length study of *Under the Volcano*, in which he proclaimed it 'the finest single novel written in the English language in [his] lifetime'.<sup>648</sup> Markson also knew Dylan Thomas and Jack Kerouac. While he was a student at Columbia, he reportedly surprised fellow postgraduates by bringing Thomas along to a party.<sup>649</sup> Markson knew Kerouac through extra-literary channels when the latter was in his declining years, and would sometimes sleep off a drunk on Markson's couch.<sup>650</sup> By establishing personal relationships with these authors, Markson in effect made a place for himself in a community of artists. This must have been important to him, for in various ways he incorporates anecdotes about these figures and others in his fiction.

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<sup>646</sup> And 'sub-genres' of the novel, such as detective fiction and the Western.

<sup>647</sup> Leslie H. Whitten, Jr., 'Markson and Lowry: Proximity and Distance', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 179.

<sup>648</sup> David Markson, *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano: Myth, Symbol, Meaning* (New York Times Books, 1978), p. vii.

<sup>649</sup> Donald Honig, 'Markson's Progress', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 250.

<sup>650</sup> Tabbi, 'An Interview with David Markson', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 106.

Markson did not, however, have the opportunity to meet some of the giants of Modernist literature who had a profound impact on his work. James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound proved to be of lasting influence. In 1989 Markson said that he looks at something by or about Joyce 'practically every other day. There are times when I feel I *breathe* the man'.<sup>651</sup> He has said that his 1996 book, *Reader's Block*, was to some extent modelled on *The Waste Land*.<sup>652</sup> Markson takes a number of things from these authors. The exuberantly playful language of his 1977 novel *Springer's Progress* is reminiscent of Joyce, for example. But perhaps the most important characteristic of these authors to Markson is the way in which all three incorporate references and allusions to a wide range of literature and cultural figures and artifacts. Their engagement with the past in works that were decidedly new in formal terms is for Markson one of the most intriguing features of the Modernists, and one that he has chosen to imitate, but in his own way.

In his critical study *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano*, Markson describes his ideas regarding what makes fiction Modern: a musical structure or 'spatial' organisation, and a 'bridging' of the past and the present. Elsewhere he explains that experimental Modernist texts represent what was

surely the most radical break with tradition in centuries—even if each of them from *The Waste Land* to *The Cantos* nonetheless reeks of the classics that constitute that tradition itself. As the man said when it was suggested that we know more than the ancients: Precisely, and they are what we know.<sup>653</sup>

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>652</sup> Markson made this remark in a letter to Joseph Tabbi, 1 June 1999, quoted in Tabbi, *Cognitive Fictions* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 151, n. 6.

<sup>653</sup> David Markson, 'Reviewers in Flat Heels: Being a Postface to Several Novels', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 128. 'The man' Markson refers to is of course T. S. Eliot, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.

Lowry's protagonist in *Under the Volcano*, the Consul, is extraordinarily learned. Markson says the Consul 'must be seen to represent modern man because of what he does know, which is all we mean by modern'.<sup>654</sup>

To be modern, according to this Eliotic notion, is to be the curator of the wisdom and creations of the ancients (and of the moderns). But literature and culture are not to be cherished as of merely historical value. Instead, Markson asserts that human nature is essentially the same as it ever was, and therefore literature, art, and the mythology of the past remain relevant in the present.

A novel like *Ulysses*, concerned literally with a circumscribed temporal situation, is seen to deal with something else entirely when we become conscious of Joyce's parallels with the *Odyssey*. Time is bridged, past and present occur in effect simultaneously—and in this same removal from the ephemeral, the writer gives the lie to our contemporary sense of dissociation.<sup>655</sup>

Markson refers to artists who perform this bridging function as 'mythic' writers, and Lowry is to be counted among their number. 'It is the "mythic" artist', says Markson, 'more profoundly than any archaeologist or anthropologist, who will project this timeless "shared" continuity of human experience'.<sup>656</sup>

The curatorial nature of Markson's brand of Modernism is regarded by some as a 'moral' value. Writing about *Springer's Progress*, Seymour Krim avers that it is 'a very moral book. Amoral and groiny as the subject-matter may be, the real morality is in the writing, so strict, so caring, so classically grounded and conversant, so redemptive of the threatened sources of literature'.<sup>657</sup> In other words, literature itself is a value, as are the life of the mind, things of the intellect, and the creative impulse. These are part of human nature; they are 'the essence of

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<sup>654</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>655</sup> Markson, *Lowry's Volcano*, p. 4.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid.

<sup>657</sup> Seymour Krim, 'A Letter to Holt, Rinehart and Winston', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 194.

man's creative tradition—which *is* man'.<sup>658</sup> Markson's 'conversancy' with literature and culture amounts to a way of conversing with other writers and artists, of the past as well as the present, and with readers, present and future; it is a means of connecting with other people across time and space. That human nature and experience are essentially timeless is also the basis of Markson's rejection of 'sociopolitical-economic import' in his work. Do we still read Dante, he asks, because we are 'impatient for news about the Guelphs and Ghibellines?'.<sup>659</sup>

The formal innovation that characterises Modernism is also important to Markson. Although the allusions to myths and archetypes in *Under the Volcano* hearken back to the literature of the ages, awareness of them and the attempt to integrate them into a single literary work, and the particular method by which that integration is achieved, are distinctively new. 'Milton and Shakespeare reek of traditional classic "borrowings", [...] but what is meant to be perceived in "charged" fiction of this contemporary sort is finally a method of *juxtaposition*'.<sup>660</sup> One way to describe the organisation of a work with this 'juxtaposition' is as 'spatial', a term Markson uses often in *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano*. He is no doubt referring to Joseph Frank's concept, developed in the well-known essay 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature'.

Frank's account of spatial form is based on 'the principle of reflexive reference' that characterises Modern poetry and the Modern novel. Spatial form is built up by a series of allusions, references, or symbols, which achieve their

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<sup>658</sup> Lowry's *Volcano*, p. 6.

<sup>659</sup> Markson, 'Reviewers in Flat Heels', p. 125.

<sup>660</sup> Lowry's *Volcano*, p. 4.

proper significance only when the work has been apprehended as a whole.<sup>661</sup>

According to Frank, ‘modern literature has been engaged in transmuting the time world of history into the timeless world of myth’, which ‘finds its appropriate aesthetic expression in spatial form’. Lowry’s ‘spatial’ method is a wonderfully rich one, says Markson, for ‘in a mythic novel *nothing* is inconsequential; [...] even the most ostensibly trivial reference, when viewed in conjunction with its reflexive echoes and repetitions, will be understood to speak volumes’.<sup>662</sup> That which speaks volumes might seem at first to be the opposite of Minimalist, and therefore it would seem difficult for Markson to follow the tradition he describes in Minimalist works. Yet I hope to show in this chapter how he gradually came to do so.

Markson published his first novel in the late 1950s. But the appearance of *Reader’s Block* in 1996 marked the beginning of his Minimalism.<sup>663</sup> Since then he has published two more books—*This Is Not a Novel* in 2001 and *Vanishing Point* in 2004—in a similar, Minimalist format. These three related novels represent a commitment to Minimalism. In them, Markson seeks to renew the connection between artistic tradition and experimentation, the genre of the novel, and the relationship between author and reader. Minimalism is the particular mode that allows Markson to exercise his Modernist belief in the value of tradition and the efficacy and essentially communicative function of language and literature, while engaging in radical experimentation that allies him with Modernist innovators.

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<sup>661</sup> Joseph Frank, ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature’, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 15, 64. Frank’s essay was originally published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1945.

<sup>662</sup> Lowry’s *Volcano*, p. 7.

<sup>663</sup> As I will show, there are tendencies in Markson’s previous work that continue in his recent, Minimalist novels. Arguably there are steps taken toward Minimalism in his 1988 book, *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, an issue I will take up in my discussion of that novel.



The scant body of criticism available on Markson has been dominated by Joseph Tabbi, who has preceded me in describing Markson as a Minimalist and Modernist; it was he who termed the author 'our last literary modernist'. Nevertheless, he has applied the term Minimalist to Markson somewhat tentatively, and with shifts of emphasis. I will deal with Tabbi's changing views on Markson as a Minimalist in my discussion of the work itself. Meanwhile, I would like to briefly address Tabbi's take on Markson's realism, which is related to the issue of his Modernism.

In Tabbi's 2002 study *Cognitive Fictions*, which contains his most recent treatment of Markson's work, he argues that what may seem like experimentalist, elitist self-reflexivity, a tendency to retrench within the boundaries of literature, may instead be a new form of realism. This realism is conditioned by the role of media in contemporary experience, and, more particularly, its effect upon consciousness. The very form of novels reflecting an awareness of media intervention into thought is shared, Tabbi argues; it is intersubjective, and such novels are therefore not solipsistic. These novels represent 'not an escape from the world, but a way into it, and not a denial of realism in literature and philosophy, but its reconceptualization'.<sup>664</sup> Tabbi thus sees Markson's novels not as examples of 'a belated modernist reflexivity',<sup>665</sup> but as instances of a realism particularly suited to the current era in its representation of acts of cognition.

Tabbi acknowledges that Markson's writings 'take their place within the modernist tradition', even as he notes their similarity to hypertext and virtual reality.<sup>666</sup> Markson places the narrators of his last four novels in isolation, but, as noted, the novels are not solipsistic. 'In every case', Tabbi notes, 'enclosure

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<sup>664</sup> Tabbi, *Cognitive Fictions*, p. xxvi.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

within the sphere of consciousness leads not to an end, but to a broadening of possible contacts with the environment'. The acts of cognition represented in such novels are like selections of information from an environment resembling a computer database. 'The world, through such coding procedures, is recognized not as a separate reality to be referenced but rather as a set of already existing narratives to be repurposed, or remediated, within the text of the journal or the computer database'. Tabbi considers such novels realistic in their portrayal of thought in the contemporary, hyper-mediated world. 'As the experiential world is remediated by computer technology', he writes, 'so, then, does the realistic novel get replaced by a system of notations—thoughts, events, conversations, things read—in a literary journal'. This leads to 'the novel's redefinition not as a vehicle for telling stories, but as a medium for holding stories in thought'.<sup>667</sup> This redefinition of the novel amounts to a renewal of the form, one made necessary, according to Tabbi, because the existence of the novel is threatened by new media. It is, therefore, a renewal specific to the contemporary era.

As I see it, Markson's impulse to renew the novel has less to do with the impact of computers and new media on our lives than it does with Modernist experimentation. Markson's own conception of what it means to be modern shows that the structure of his recent novels is an attempt to deal with the weight of cultural tradition that is the modern inheritance rather than a response to new media technology. Although I agree with Tabbi that Markson is a realist and a Minimalist, there are differences in the way we conceive those features of his work.

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<sup>667</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-84.

A number of the authors in this thesis have based their Minimalist practice on an idea regarding what is essential to a particular literary form or genre. David Markson is among them. An interest in the conventions of genre is apparent in Markson's early publications. In his early work, that interest seemed to be not in the genre of the novel as such, but in particular novelistic sub-genres. He composed three works of detective fiction featuring the hardboiled private eye Harry Fannin in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The first of these, *Epitaph for a Tramp* (1959), represents an attempt at renewing a low or popular genre in part by incorporating cultural tradition into it. Just how serious Markson was regarding this effort, though, is indicated in his listing the Fannin books as 'entertainments' rather than novels among his works.

*The Ballad of Dingus Magee* (1965) also renews a form of genre fiction, the Western. It is a light-hearted book, an 'innocuous concoction', in Markson's words,<sup>668</sup> but it is accorded the status of novel in his list of works, perhaps because of the critical attention it received. Leslie Fiedler hails *Dingus* as an example of the 'New Western', 'a form which not so much redeems the Pop Western as exploits it with irreverence and pleasure, in contempt of the "serious reader" and his expectations' and raises questions about the 'the relationship between "high" and "low" art'.<sup>669</sup> Others disagree with the stance of *Dingus* regarding the 'serious reader', describing it as a parody 'for the sophisticated reader of westerns'.<sup>670</sup>

*The Ballad of Dingus Magee* may have been a light-hearted renewal of the Western, and the Fannin books were contemporary re-workings of the detective novel. But the concept of artistic renewal in a much more serious sense is a major

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<sup>668</sup> Markson, in Tabbi, 'Interview', p. 107.

<sup>669</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), pp. 14, 15.

<sup>670</sup> Betty Rosenberg and Diana Tixier Herald, *Genrelecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1991), p. 29.

theme in a novel Markson was working on while he was writing those books. Markson began *Going Down* in the late 1950s but it was not published until 1970. Although Christian symbolism is employed throughout the book, it is used without any real sense of hope for the rebirth promised by Christianity. Similarly, the prospect of spiritual renewal by means of art is raised, but ultimately discounted. Markson's outlook in this respect is therefore more like that of Djuna Barnes, whose influence on the book is evident, than of T. S. Eliot. Markson has said that *Going Down* is 'as fine a novel as I will ever write', and it is indeed worthy of critical praise. But it is not radically new. It is not modern in that it does not represent a significant departure from the tradition it invokes and seeks a place within.

*Going Down* has been called 'Markson's *Volcano*',<sup>671</sup> and there are indeed a number of similarities between Markson's book and Lowry's. Both are set in Mexico and have self-destructive artists as protagonists, and both make generous use of mythic tradition and Christian symbolism. But Markson has rightly protested that *Going Down* is his own rather than an imitation of Lowry. Like Lowry, he lived in Mexico, for example, and so the setting of his novel there is based on personal experience rather than on *Under the Volcano*. Markson also claims that his book is less heavily symbolic than Lowry's, that it is 'more plugged into ordinary reality'.<sup>672</sup>

The troubled poet Steve is a Christ figure in Markson's book, and his function as such is one that is built up gradually. The painter Fern recognises that Steve is in despair, yet she tries to convince him to write the poetry he has given up. Her argument is in part that though the negativity of books written since

<sup>671</sup> Edward Butscher, 'David Markson's *Volcano: Going Down*', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), pp. 187-191

<sup>672</sup> Tabbi, 'Interview', p. 109.

Nietzsche serve as evidence of an overwhelming bleakness, their authors still manage to write. Her choice of Nietzsche as the originator of this tradition of despair is significant in that it implies that the source of despair is the death of God. Nietzsche advocated creativity as a source of value in a godless world, and it is clear that Fern hopes art will serve where religion no longer can. 'Couldn't the very act of writing itself be a kind of--?', and Steve completes her thought: 'Salvation? Creation as an act of faith [...]?' (98-99).

At the end of the book Petra visits her husband Manolo, who has been jailed for murdering someone he mistook for Steve. Steve has committed suicide, and Petra brings his jacket to Manolo. In the pocket they find 'something flimsy, a notebook of the kind possessed by children at school. There was writing, in pencil, on many of the pages'. Apparently Steve had followed Fern's suggestion and begun writing after all. But the possibility raised of salvation by means of artistic creation is grimly undercut.

"Ah, that also I can utilize," Manolo said. "Never is there sufficient, for when one excuses himself."

"Si. I had meant to bring you some leaves," Petra said, offering it across. (278)

With these lines the book ends. It would be difficult to state more emphatically the way in which art, seen by some as offering hope for redemption or spiritual renewal, is generally devalued.

Markson's next novel, *Springer's Progress*, is altogether more hopeful. The theme of renewal—renewal of life, of hope, of love, of the writing impulse—features strongly in the book. This is rather less than subtle in the hero's name, Lucien Springer, but more so in that of his ladylove, Jessica Cornford. Jessica is perhaps a fertility goddess, the 'corn' portion of her surname suggesting the riches

of agricultural crops, and their annual renewal. 'Ford' brings to mind life-giving water, rather than Eliot's 'death by water'. It is not water that overwhelms one to the point of drowning, but refers to the point at which a stream maybe traversed, thus allowing transition from one place or state to another. It may also be significant that the name Cornford appears in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, a fact Markson has apparently gone to some scholarly pains to investigate. The mention by Lowry's character Hugh of one John Cornford is given the following gloss:

he was the son of F. M. Cornford, who along with Frazer, Jane Ellen Harrison and others formed the so-called "Cambridge School" in classics and anthropology—the fount of all such comparative mytho-ritualistic readings, and whose influence would have been all-pervasive by the time Lowry himself attended the university.<sup>673</sup>

Thus the use of the name 'Cornford' in *Springer's Progress* is a 'mytho-ritualistic' connection to the use of renewal myths in both Lowry's book and Eliot's *Waste Land* (which was also informed by the work of Frazer). Furthermore, the name 'Jessica' may also serve as an allusion to Jessie L. Weston, whose work Eliot drew on for *The Waste Land*. These references are almost certainly not unintended.

Joseph Tabbi has said that the style of *Springer's Progress* 'at times approaches the telegraphic in its terseness'.<sup>674</sup> But while Markson is less than generous with the number of words he allows on the page and in the sentence, his playful choice and arrangement of them make for a decidedly maximalist rather than typically Minimalist flat tone. For example, Springer confronts the dirt and disarray when he first visits Jessica's flat. 'Come inside, let's', she invites.

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<sup>673</sup> Lowry's *Volcano*, p. 163.

<sup>674</sup> Tabbi, 'Introduction', p. 97.

Let's. Home is where the flotsam is, two shakes and convivial Cornford's cozily crosslegged on the rug. Springer take an oath there's a rug? Random worn square footage attesting, bulk's periodicals and soda cans.<sup>675</sup>

The ebullient alliteration is inspired by Jessica: her presence is all that is needed to transform a filthy room into home, a cosy and convivial environment.

*Springer's Progress* is not stylistically Minimalist. Nevertheless, reduction is at work in the novel, although not as a means of getting at something essential. Rather, it is a device for making the language rich, condensing it to make it sweeter and thicker. Certain words are avoided or elided: except for in dialogue, 'is' appears in its contracted rather than full form, and is often dropped altogether. The future tense 'will' receives similar treatment. Questions abound in the narration, without the benefit of 'wh-' words, and inverted syntax is the norm. This is far from sparse, flat, stylistically Minimalist prose. Similarly, reduction in chapter size seems less a device for exploring the formal boundaries of one of the units of the novel than a way of inserting *more*, of making space for extra bits such as the poems Springer writes for Jessica. Markson does not connect these up—there are 'aligned gaps' the reader must leap<sup>676</sup>—but the effect is one of extra things, material that could be extraneous to the story itself as a purely narrative structure.

*Springer's Progress* is divided into four sections that range from between twenty-one and thirty-six chapters each. Since the entire book has only 234 pages, this means that each chapter is quite brief, some only half a page (if that). The final chapter contains only two words: 'Being continued'. This constitutes a joke,

<sup>675</sup> Markson, *Springer's Progress*, p. 23.

<sup>676</sup> Among the innovations of Modernism, according to Hugh Kenner, was that 'Polyglot masterpieces were stress-tested, to validate new systems of connectedness, as that the reader's mind can jump aligned gaps, or that no uttering voice need be specified, nor unified.' *A Homemade World*, p. xiii.

since Jessica has told Springer that he can't possibly, as he has threatened to do, end a book with 'to be continued'. The ending contributes to the comic nature of the book, since it refers to the continuation not just of the novel Lucien is writing (and thus his conquest of writer's block), but of the affair. Near the end of this self-reflexive novel we see Lucien at work on an early version of the book we are reading.

The allusions in *Springer's Progress* at times come so fast and thick that Steven Moore has been able to identify in one half page references to or echoes or parodies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Walt Whitman, James Joyce, Dylan Thomas, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Novalis, Spinoza, and a medieval lyric. Moore says that 'a literary allusion in a novel of this sort is not a respected authority lending cultural weight, but rather a straight man for the author's wit'.<sup>677</sup> But allusion in the book is more than just that. Markson has said that *Springer's Progress* is 'a novel about the creative process, or one variant thereof—about what triggers it, how it's pursued, about what goes on in the writer's *head*'. Springer, Markson's 'virtual alter ego',<sup>678</sup> has a head full of literature, art, and learning, as do Markson's most memorable characters. Lucien also has a wicked way with words that allows him to put his knowledge to full, rollicking use.

In *Springer's Progress* Markson amply demonstrates his impressive knowledge of literature, his 'conversancy' with the tradition (to return to Seymour Krim's remark). He does so in the spirit of renewal: the book is meant to be, in Krim's words, '*redemptive* of the threatened sources of literature'.<sup>679</sup> In this it resembles the Modernism of Joyce and Eliot. Krim also takes the writing itself as

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<sup>677</sup> Stephen Moore, 'David Markson and the Art of Allusion', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10 (Summer 1990), p. 112.

<sup>678</sup> Markson, 'Reviewers in Flat Heels', p. 125.

<sup>679</sup> Krim, 'A Letter to Holt, Rinehart and Winston', p. 194; emphasis added.



evidence for the value of *Springer's Progress*. The novel certainly represents an impressive achievement with regard to the manipulation of language. Markson's attention to the minute details of his sentences and the creativity of his playful expressions exude enthusiasm for the craft of writing itself. The extraordinary richness of the writing displays not only the author's skill, but his love of literature. Lucien's success in bringing Jessica to a state of orgasmic excess at the end parallel's Markson's working of the tradition he knows and loves so well to a literary climax.

Burton Feldman has called *Springer's Progress* the beginning of 'Markson's New Way', the novel in which Markson acquires his own, distinctive voice, freeing himself from the 'old way' inherited from Joyce and Lowry that *Going Down* exemplifies.<sup>680</sup> Although he considers *Wittgenstein's Mistress* also to be a 'new way' novel, Feldman is perfectly aware, as any reader cannot help but be, of the stark differences between it and the novel that immediately precedes it. 'After Springer's incorrigible exuberance', Feldman writes, in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* 'we reach an endless rain of cunningly flat sentences, drop after lonely drop, each a separate paragraph'.<sup>681</sup> While I see a certain continuity in Markson's work that transcends any break, I also see a point at which Markson's treatment of persistent themes begins to take on a particular character. That is, although Markson continues to mine the same vein, he goes about it in a different way. Rather than *Springer's Progress*, however, I locate the point of departure at *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.

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<sup>680</sup> Burton Feldman, 'Markson's New Way', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 157.

<sup>681</sup> Feldman, 'Markson's New Way', p. 161.

A span of eleven years stretches between the publication of *Springer's Progress* and that of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in 1988. *Wittgenstein* was surely written somewhat earlier than the publication date suggests, however. The novel was rejected an astonishing fifty-four times before finally being accepted by Dalkey Archive Press in 1987.<sup>682</sup> Since its publication, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* has garnered accolades, even from young writers working in very different modes. Ann Beattie was the first person to whom Markson showed the manuscript,<sup>683</sup> and she praised it extravagantly. David Foster Wallace lauds *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as 'an erudite, breathtakingly cerebral novel'.<sup>684</sup> Wallace is author of the decidedly maximalist *Infinite Jest*, which weighs in at a hefty 1000-plus pages. Wallace takes writing about *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as an opportunity to fire a shot against the so-called Minimalists. The novel is, Wallace thinks, 'one of the U.S. decade's best', therefore he 'deplore[s] its relative neglect & its consignment by journals like the *NYTBR* to smarmy review by a young Carverian'.<sup>685</sup> Wallace does not say what it is about Amy Hempel's review that counts as 'smarmy'. The terms of his dismissal hint that his objection is more to the fact that it was given to one of her ilk for review than to the substance of the review itself, which he does not quote or summarise.

It seems likely that the decision to allocate *Wittgenstein's Mistress* to 'a young Carverian' for review was based on the fact that it had already been praised so highly by Beattie, who was often associated with Carver as a Minimalist in the 1980s. Near the beginning of 'David Markson: An Introduction', in the *Review of*

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<sup>682</sup> See Tabbi, 'Interview', p. 107 and Steven Moore's Afterword to *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 1988), pp. 243-244.

<sup>683</sup> Tabbi, 'Interview', p. 108.

<sup>684</sup> As quoted on the cover and in the liner notes to the November 1998 printing of the second paperback edition of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.

<sup>685</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*', *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10:2 (Summer 1990), p. 220.

*Contemporary Fiction* (1990), Tabbi presents Markson's work as an anomaly in 'a decade increasingly characterized by "minimalist" novels'.<sup>686</sup> At the end of the same article, Tabbi returns to the issue, remarking that Markson 'might appear to be working within the "minimalist" vein that has characterized a good deal of American fiction in the eighties',<sup>687</sup> but again makes an effort to distinguish Markson's work from Minimalism. Tabbi thus exhibits both a desire and a reluctance to associate Markson with Minimalism. The desire stems from Tabbi's recognition of 'the extreme reduction of the narrator's style and life situation'<sup>688</sup> in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. The cause of the reluctance is no doubt attributable to Markson's response to Tabbi's query in an interview: 'Basically', replied Markson, 'I don't think of the book as minimalist'.<sup>689</sup> This remark must be placed in the context of the debate over literary Minimalism in 1980s America that I detailed in Chapter 3.<sup>690</sup> It would have been difficult for Markson to avoid the specific connotations of the term as used at that time. Markson's novel resembles those of the Carver school of Minimalism in only one respect, and that is in the 'flat' tone noted by Feldman.

Nevertheless, with *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Markson does seem to be striking out on a path that leads to 'his own, distinctively minimalist' fiction.<sup>691</sup> I will address the ways in which the novel at least approaches Minimalism shortly, but must now turn to a brief description of the book. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is narrated by a woman who, we eventually learn, is named Kate. She is in the unenviable position of being the last living creature on earth, and we are given no

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<sup>686</sup> Tabbi, 'David Markson: An Introduction', p. 91.

<sup>687</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>688</sup> Ibid.

<sup>689</sup> Tabbi, 'An Interview with David Markson', p. 114.

<sup>690</sup> The interview took place in 1989.

<sup>691</sup> Tabbi, 'Solitary Inventions', p. 758.

explanation of how she came to be in this situation, nor does it seem necessary for us to have this information. Kate is typing the sentences that the book comprises. They appear in short paragraphs, most of which have only one sentence each, and which follow one after another, with no breaks in the form of chapter divisions nor extra white space on the page. The book thus flows continuously from the beginning, without a single blank line.

*Wittgenstein's Mistress* is Minimalist in terms of narrative development. Many a sentence Kate types is a response to others that have preceded it. She endlessly qualifies, questions, corrects, or otherwise responds to her own statements. Words and phrases such as 'doubtless', 'as a matter of fact', 'possibly', 'actually', and 'in fact', occur frequently. Thus the novel proceeds statement by statement, rather than according to a plot. Very little actually happens in the book. Kate thinks, she types, and she goes about the daily business of existence. We do learn about some incidents in her former life (the deaths of her son and mother, for example), and we hear about things she has done since she has been alone. But none of what we learn adds up to make a coherent story, and we never get the part of it one might expect: the tale of how she came to be in her solitary condition. Any sense of movement, other than occasional mentions of the passing of time, that might give the novel at least the appearance of narrative, takes place on the level of the sentence, with most of them linking directly to the one that precedes it. In this sense, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is Minimalist in form.

Kate's tone is flat, and some of her sentences are brief, but they are not brief enough (nor are they so consistently so) to be considered Minimalist units of fiction. A stronger case can be made for Minimalism at the level of the paragraph. Those in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* more often than not consist of only a single

sentence. Since there are no other formal breaks—no sections or chapters—the novel does not exhibit a Minimalism of unit based on those structural elements. Indeed, at 240 pages, the book is not exceptionally short, so it is not Minimalist in relation to conventional novel length, not Minimalist in scale.

Dialogue is impossible, of course, and although Kate remembers some conversations and imagines others, the book is entirely in her voice. Markson has said that the novel's voice is 'minimal', but 'only because Kate's very life situation is, stripped to its barest essentials'.<sup>692</sup> I would argue instead that it is her voice, and the lack of variation from it, that gives the novel its flat tone, and that this flatness, an artful attempt on Markson's part to make Kate appear artless, is one respect in which *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is Minimalist. The lack of ornamentation in the language is meant to resemble that of a woman who is not a writer: 'writing novels is not my trade' she says (232). Though later there occurs a metafictional discussion of the possibility that she might write a novel about a woman in her situation, what we have in this book is 'ordinary' language, albeit that of an educated, intelligent woman.

Kate remarks on the cultural information that fills her head, 'So that it is like a bloody museum, sometimes', 'Or as if I have been appointed the curator of all the world. Well, as I was, as in a manner of speaking I undeniably am' (227). Kate herself is a painter, and she is knowledgeable about art, artists, and literature. A great many of her statements are about artists or some aspect of culture. By virtue of such references, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* participates in the allusive tradition Markson so admired in Lowry, and which is, in some form or another, a feature of nearly all his work. In her time alone in the world, Kate has made use of

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<sup>692</sup> Tabbi, 'Interview', p. 114.

the resources she has found and travelled to Mexico, to see the site of the Trojan war, and throughout Europe, visiting and sometimes living in art museums. She is one of those characters, like Lowry's Consul, who are modern by virtue of what they know. The modern character, with a head full of art, literature, and culture, is one of those features that recur throughout most of Markson's writings. Other such near-constants include references to art and artists in general, and facts or thoughts about particular artists or cultural figures.

Kate's tendency to constantly question and revise her own statements introduces some new themes in Markson's work. The recalcitrance of language is one such theme; it is repeatedly invoked by her Wittgensteinian bent for clarifying her statements. She resembles many of Lydia Davis's narrators in her struggle to reconcile the logic inherent in language with common sense. She is concerned with accuracy, truth, and verification, with making sure that her words say just what she means and that she is not 'bewitched' by habit into using figures of speech that, when examined, are unclear or inaccurate.

Kate also questions the existential status of visual representations and of mental imagining, which suggests some anxiety about the place of artworks in the world. She even raises the issue of an audience or reader's participation in the constitution of a work.

[...] if so many things would appear to exist only in my head, once I do sit here [and type] they then turn out to exist on these pages as well.

Presumably they exist on these pages.

If somebody were to look at these pages who could understand only Russian, I have no idea what would exist on these pages. (156)

Similarly, she asks:

If there were no more copies accessible anywhere of *Anna Karenina*, in other words, would its title still be *Anna Karenina*?  
(93)

By bringing such themes into *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Markson has arguably ventured into the realm of metafiction, an area explored further in his subsequent novels. Kate's musings on what she is typing are metaphysical inquiries into the nature of writing. Broader meta-artistic issues are also broached. Kate visits a garbage dump, and notes the pile of broken bottles there:

Certainly the bottles are extraordinarily pretty, being of various colors.  
[...]  
In fact the entire mound of them is sometimes like a kind of glistening sculpture.  
Michelangelo would not have thought so, but I think so.  
(128)

The source of the difference in what Kate thinks about the bottles and what Michelangelo would think about them is the fact that Kate lives after the modernist revolution in art, and has come to appreciate as art what formerly would not qualify as such. Michelangelo would not be accustomed to looking upon a pile of debris and considering it a work of art, but after a century of experimentation in the manner of Duchamp's *Fountain*, we are much more amenable to the idea. It is not at all inconceivable to us that heaps of broken glass might be exhibited as art.

The question is not just that of what counts as a work of art, but what counts as an example of a particular form of art. The difference between Kate's and Michelangelo's views may be based on more specific ideas regarding the nature of sculpture.<sup>693</sup>

Sculpture is the art of taking away superfluous material, Michelangelo once said.  
He also said, conversely, that painting is the art of adding things on.

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<sup>693</sup> I take it for granted here that what Kate (and Markson) say are Michelangelo's views.

Although doubtless he would not have thought that the heap of added-on bottles is like a painting, either. (129)

Markson's later experiments with the genre of the novel are prefigured in such musings over the nature of particular artforms.

For all its meta-artistic speculation and direct treatment of philosophical issues, as well as its lack of traditional narrative development, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is still the story of a well-developed character: Kate, a woman whose loneliness exceeds that any of us can imagine experiencing. It is a novel, in David Foster Wallace's words, 'whose conclusion defies you not to cry',<sup>694</sup> and it does so because we have come to know Kate so well, having been privy to her thoughts and seen them become confused as she edges into old age or madness or both. Loneliness and old age also feature prominently in Markson's next novel, *Reader's Block*, where the metafictional element is even more pronounced, and the reduction starker. Markson took his first steps toward Minimalism—of style (in the flat tone), form (narrative development), and unit (the paragraph)—in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. With *Reader's Block* he has just arrived.

By the time Tabbi published his essay 'Solitary Inventions: David Markson at the End of the Line' in 1997, *Reader's Block* had appeared. Tabbi opens that article with a discussion of Jonathan Franzen's notion of 'what is essentially *literary*' in a work, 'a conception of writing that is perhaps closer to minimalist narratives and the subjectivized, interior spaces of a Beckett or a Kafka than it is to either the realist novel of social engagement or the postmodern meganovel'. Having thus set the stage, Tabbi becomes bolder, and explicitly

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<sup>694</sup> As quoted on the cover and in the liner notes to the November 1998 printing of the second paperback edition of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.



applies the term Minimalist to Markson's writing: 'In making [...] reduction and displacement the condition of his own, distinctively minimalist art forms, Markson isolates something basic about narrative'. Apparently *Reader's Block* convinced Tabbi that Minimalism was indeed the appropriate term for Markson's endeavours, the author's rejection of it notwithstanding.

The Minimalism Tabbi refers to in 1997 is not that with the specific 1980s American connotations he had used in the earlier article. Perhaps that particular use of the term had contributed to his reluctance to employ it with regard to Markson, even while he recognised its aptness. But by 1997 the heyday of eighties Minimalism was over, and with the even more starkly reduced *Reader's Block* adding to the evidence of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Tabbi was free to reclaim 'Minimalist' with reference to Markson. What other term is adequate for a book that eschews or reduces to the least possible the conventions of the novel, while still purporting to be a novel? Markson himself wryly raises the same question by titling his subsequent book, written in the same vein, *This Is Not a Novel*.

*Reader's Block* resembles *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in that it, too, has no chapters or section breaks, and is made up of brief paragraphs, most of which are only a single sentence long. Yet one difference is immediately apparent to the eye: in *Reader's Block* there is much more white space and less text on the page. The movement toward Minimalism is thus effected in part by a reduction in the sheer number of words. *Reader's Block* exhibits Minimalism of scale. Although at times two paragraphs are set together, in most cases each paragraph is preceded and followed by a blank space. In another reductive move, one that falls under Minimalism of unit, most of the sentences of which the paragraphs are composed are briefer than those in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. They are frequently not sentences

at all, but consist of a single proper name. A fair proportion of those that are complete sentences are structured simply as straightforward statements of fact, such as: 'Erasmus was illegitimate'; 'Theodore Dreiser was an anti-Semite'; and 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman committed suicide' (40-42). These sentences are Minimalist in style and structure. They are not adorned with adjectives or adverbs, they employ simply, everyday verbs, and they predicate only one thing of one subject.

Markson's concern with genre in *Reader's Block* is clear right from the start. By the fifth page of text, the question is baldly put: 'What is a novel in any case?' (13) Although in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* similar questions were asked more generally or vaguely, in this book such concerns are at the forefront. The first lines indicate the novel's metafictional status. The opening sentence, 'Someone nodded hello to me on the street yesterday', is immediately followed by a question: 'To me, or to him?' 'Someone nodded hello to Reader on the street yesterday', comes the reply (9). Reader, apparently, is a writer, and there is deliberate confusion over how far Reader and the narrator are to be identified with one another. 'Even among the most tentative first thoughts about a first draft, why is Reader thinking of his central character as Reader?' Reader is a third-person entity, but there is also an 'I' in the novel. This 'I' states that he is growing older. But things become murkier: 'Granted, Reader is essentially the I in instances such as that. Presumably in most others he will not be the I at all, however' (10). We have been warned that we may not be able to distinguish between the two beings who are entitled to use the pronoun 'I' in this book.

One might puzzle over why the name 'Reader' is given to this character who can sometimes be the 'I' in the book, and sometimes not. If Reader is a

writer, why not call him 'Writer'? The title highlights that question, for while 'writer's block' is a familiar phrase, 'reader's block' is not. Readers often conflate writer and narrator, but in this case it seems that Reader has become part of the melange. The key to this riddle, I will argue, is that *Reader's Block* is in part a response to poststructuralist theory, and particularly to the concept of the Death of the Author.

In Joseph Tabbi's 1989 interview with him, Markson denies—twice—that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was written under the influence of 'contemporary theory' or Roland Barthes, saying that he tends to dismiss most of what he does know of theories. 'Was the *diegetic diachrony* of narration truly damaged by Flaubert, as Lyotard says?' comes the sarcastic question in *Reader's Block*. This is followed by a litany of terms associated with literary theory:

Diegetic, dialogic, hegemonic. Privilege, as a verb.  
 Foreground, as a verb. Valorize. Praxis. Simulacra. Metafiction.  
 Logocentrism. Phallocentrism. Discourse. Signifier/signified.  
 Aporia.  
 Late capitalism. Gynophobia.  
 Text. (RB 156)

The narrator rejects all these as applicable to his novel—'None of the above' follows immediately—and so they are dismissed altogether.

Lyotard's remark in full reads:

The literary institution, as Proust inherits it from Balzac and Flaubert, is admittedly subverted in that the hero is no longer a character but the inner consciousness of time, and in that the diegetic diachrony, already damaged by Flaubert, is here put in question because of the narrative voice.<sup>695</sup>

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<sup>695</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?', in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 80.

Markson's list of terms indicate that his quarrel is in large part with the jargon adopted by Lyotard and others. Yet Lyotard's statement about character is also a likely target of Markson's ire.

Markson did admit, however, that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* can be interpreted as consistent with the ideas of Barthes or Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>696</sup> Kate, as Markson points out, does mention the structuralist anthropologist and the poststructuralist literary theorist, but she gets their names wrong. 'As quickly as one had gotten accustomed to a name like Jacques Lévi-Strauss', she says, 'there was everybody talking about Jacques Barthes. And three days after that about Jacques somebody else. And in the meantime all one had honestly ever been trying to do was catch up to Susan Sontag'.<sup>697</sup> The universal application of the name 'Jacques' to these French theorists brings to mind Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, whose work was in a similar structuralist or poststructuralist vein. But it is also surely a not-so-subtle putdown on Markson's part, suggesting that their ideas are either indistinguishable from one another, or that it is not worth the trouble to distinguish them.

Tabbi's question directly touching upon Barthes is that, since 'Barthes says someplace that the text is a "fabric of quotations" that stem from virtually any number of cultural sources', which means that 'nothing is original with the author', 'How well might this describe a good deal of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, where the narrator keeps on evoking cultural sources almost in spite of herself?' Markson replies that 'the crucial point' is that whatever is in the novel 'is what I chose to put there. Which incidentally almost means that you could call this one

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<sup>696</sup> Tabbi, 'Interview', pp. 114, 117.

<sup>697</sup> *WM*, p. 211. The correct names are, of course, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes.

an autobiographical novel of a certain sort'.<sup>698</sup> Markson's insistence on authorial control over the text is clearly at odds with Barthes's ideas in his 'The Death of the Author', and with those of Robert Grenier, as discussed in Chapter 2. In fascinating ways, *Reader's Block* and Markson's subsequent books seem to engage directly with Barthes's essay, refuting it and enacting some of its premises simultaneously.

'The Death of the Author' draws upon structuralist linguistics, in which meaning is determined by a system of differences between signs rather than by correspondence between signifier and signified. Such a view of language dismisses subjective agency in favour of the operations of the system.<sup>699</sup> Barthes writes:

Linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*.<sup>700</sup>

Literary texts, according to Barthes, are the product of the system of language rather than of an individual person. What matter, then, if in *Reader's Block* it is unclear whether Reader is the *I* in a particular passage or not? Foucault, who is also implicated in the Death of the Author, quotes Beckett along these lines:

"What does it matter who is speaking", someone said, "what does it matter who is speaking?"<sup>701</sup>

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<sup>698</sup> Tabbi, 'Interview', p. 117.

<sup>699</sup> Séan Burke, 'A Prehistory of the Death of the Author', *The Death and Return of the Author; Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 8-19.

<sup>700</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Modern Literary Theory*, eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 2001), p.187.

<sup>701</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Volume 2 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (London: Allen Lane, 1994), p. 205.

Barthes and Foucault both insist upon the openness and multiplicity of the text, which is only possible once it has been freed from the tyranny of the Author, a figure of authority also called the 'Author-God' who is to be defied. By killing off the author, Foucault says, 'today's writing has freed itself from the theme of expression'. It now 'goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits'.<sup>702</sup> Murder of the tyrannical Author-God is an act of liberation that frees up the possibilities for interpretation. For Barthes, 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing'.<sup>703</sup> Markson's insistence on identifying his work with his own autobiography, even in a work that features a female painter rather than a male writer as its sole character, and his emphasis on his personal choice of what makes the text, are clearly opposed to this freedom from limitation celebrated by Barthes and Foucault. What is in the novel 'is what *I* chose to put there', says Markson,<sup>704</sup> emphatically discounting the notion that the author is merely 'the instance writing' and that the 'I' is merely 'the instance saying *I*'.

In *Reader's Block* the question is 'How much of Reader's own circumstances or past would he in fact give to Protagonist in such a novel?' That is, how much would he *choose* to give. Protagonist becomes mixed up not only with Reader, not only with the narrator, but with Markson himself. The answer to the question 'Protagonist has had surgery for cancer twice?', when asked of Markson, is yes.<sup>705</sup> An incident listed as 'For Protagonist's again distant literary past', in which Malcolm Lowry drinks Protagonist's shaving lotion (169), is identified later. 'The shaving lotion that Malcolm Lowry drank in Manhattan in

<sup>702</sup> Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', p. 206.

<sup>703</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 188.

<sup>704</sup> Tabbi, 'Interview', p. 117.

<sup>705</sup> Tabbi, 'Solitary Inventions', p. 755.

1954 was Mennen Skin Bracer', we are told. This is apparently an actual incident from Markson's own past. According to 'Malcolm Lowry: A Reminiscence', Lowry actually did drink Markson's shaving lotion when visiting him in New York.<sup>706</sup>

Markson's adherence to authorial choice and the limits of authorial experience that constrain the potential construction of the text can perhaps be seen as a Minimalist one. Rejecting the openness to interpretation and multiplicity of the text that Barthes and Foucault value is a reductive act. Limits are to be found in the author's personal experience, in the 'autobiography' on which he draws, and in the conscious choices he makes as a writer. Instead of opening the text up and allowing for multiplicity in its construction, Markson seeks to reduce the possibilities for interpretation.

Barthes concludes that

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. [...] the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.<sup>707</sup>

Markson's decision to call his writer character Reader appears to mock such rhetoric. The reader, according to Barthes, is the 'one place where multiplicity is focused', but in *Reader's Block*, Reader is the source of multiplicity that is not resolved into focus. Although Reader first thinks of his character, Protagonist, as living in a building in a cemetery, he comes up with additional scenarios.

Or would Reader rather see Protagonist live somewhere else entirely?

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<sup>706</sup> Markson, 'Malcolm Lowry: A Reminiscence', Appendix to *Lowry's Volcano*, p. 220.

<sup>707</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 189.

An isolated house at a beach, for instance?<sup>708</sup>

Both possibilities are pursued, but inconclusively. Reader is incapable of deciding between them. Even in the last pages of the book a question is raised regarding 'Protagonist's children':

With Reader well aware that he has categorically not thought that through either.

As with how much monumentally else? (191)

Is Protagonist finally to be in the house on the beach, with 'his inevitable portage of cartons? Beside a stairway to no passage?' or 'in accommodations at a derelict graveyard? Where nobody comes, where nobody calls?' (192). We do not know, nor is the decision one that any reader can support with reasons or evidence. The fate of Protagonist, in any case, is the same:

In the interim, what more for the elderly man in the house at the beach but to saunter out among the sandpipers and the gulls one afternoon, and stand for a time abstractedly in late autumn solitude, and then walk unremarkably into the sea?

In the interim, what more for the elderly man in the house at the cemetery but to pause at his accustomed window one afternoon, and gaze for a time abstractedly at the ranks of still white stone beyond, and then turn unremarkably to the gas? (192)

The theme of suicide is one that inevitably leads attention away from Protagonist and back to Reader himself, to the writer who mulls over these choices. The words 'And Reader? And Reader?' (193) immediately follow these two potential suicides of Protagonist. Just a page or so before there appeared a list of literary suicides, Protagonist's precursors, but just as important are the numerous suicides of *actual* people listed throughout the book, most of them artists or writers.

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<sup>708</sup> Kate lives in an isolated house at the beach. In the scenario in which Protagonist does so as well, he occupies the basement, and believes that there are two women living in the upper floors, but he never sees them.



Mention of artists and writers who have committed suicide is one form of reference to art and culture that is a near constant in Markson's work. In *Reader's Block* there are also a number of allusions, in the form of unattributed quotations. Is it 'a novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel?' (61 and 137). This 'minus', this reduction of the characteristics of the novel, again points to the Minimalism newly at work in *Reader's Block*. But the references and allusions hark back to Markson's literary beginnings, in his love for the writings of Joyce, Eliot, and Lowry. The unattributed quotations include some from *Under the Volcano* (50, 180), *Ulysses* (173), *The Waste Land* (41), Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (78, 149), Aristotle (145, 177), Markson's own *Going Down* (127), Keats's letters (124), Noam Chomsky (124), Samuel Johnson (117), *Jude the Obscure* (115), Paul Celan (119), Lewis Carroll (93), Ad Reinhardt (87), and Edgar Allan Poe (83). These quotations are presented as jewels from the treasure chest of literary and intellectual history. Surrounded by white space, they are isolated seemingly so that they can be savoured as morsels, small units of literary excellence, verbal expression, or mental ingenuity.

The above are just a few of the unattributed quotations: supposedly there are 'exactly 333' of them (166), and it would be a daunting task to identify them all. In addition, there are the aforementioned direct references to literary, artistic, and musical figures and works, as well as historical incidents and personages. When one considers that a great deal of what is in *Reader's Block* comes from external sources, one is tempted to say that it is, as Barthes would have it, a textual 'tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.<sup>709</sup> Again, when asked by Tabbi about just this idea with regard to *Wittgenstein's*

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<sup>709</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 188.

*Mistress*, Markson replied that ‘what Kate knows is what I know’.<sup>710</sup> Markson is asserting that he himself is one of those Eliotic ‘modern men’ who, like Lowry’s Consul, have a head full of culture. Like Kate, he is a curator of all the world; he is one of those who is modern by virtue of what he knows. And *Reader’s Block* is in the tradition of those experimental Modernist texts like *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Ulysses* that ‘reek of the classics’.<sup>711</sup> The difference is that it is not just the ancients and the classics that Markson draws upon, but the moderns as well.

*Reader’s Block* resembles Barthes’s description of the text as ‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’.<sup>712</sup> Although his use of unattributed quotations is arguably evidence for a lack of originality, Markson, of course, wants to retain the position of the ‘Author-God’ that Barthes intends this notion of the text to dispense with. The idea of the text as spatial is one that Markson has considered. After all, it was in spatial terms that he described the achievement of those Modernists who, like Lowry, incorporate the wealth of cultural tradition into their work. But, even though allusions and references enrich the work, Markson sees his authorial function as a limiting one: those items that he brings into his text are subsumed under his creative control. They are ‘transformed’ under his ‘creative construct’.<sup>713</sup>

The spatiality of Markson’s paradigmatic Modernist texts occurs on the level of content. That is, it is not a material feature of the text. This remains the case with *Reader’s Block*, though it does approach a concrete form. It is as though the ‘block’ of a book like *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* has been carved away at, the

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<sup>710</sup> Tabbi, ‘Interview’, p. 117.

<sup>711</sup> Markson, ‘Reviewers in Flat Heels’, p. 128.

<sup>712</sup> Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, p. 188.

<sup>713</sup> Lowry’s *Volcano*, p. 8.

superfluous material removed, à la Michelangelo, to make the sculpture that is *Reader's Block*. The unusual appearance of *Reader's Block*, along with its parallel to visual art, is reinforced in the first few pages in a metafictional musing on the nature of the work:

Nonlinear? Discontinuous? Collage-like?  
An assemblage? (14)

In the context of a consideration of Markson's work in light of hypertext as a model for fiction, Tabbi points out that

The casting of language into what is, essentially, a spatial and visual form is only partly realized in the novel, and the experiment is abandoned altogether in the internal novel that Reader projects but doesn't write.

'No matter how "collage-like" the organization of ideas and linked references', he goes on to say, Markson 'respect[s] the alphabetic linearity of print'.<sup>714</sup> Although *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and *Reader's Block* 'are not hypertexts', the juxtaposed references in his books are assembled in the virtual space that is 'the mind of Markson's narrator'.<sup>715</sup> This prepares the way for an encounter: Markson's novels

are interactive in the sense that, for a narrative to develop at all, significant connections need to form in a reader's mind. The citations in *Reader's Block*, each one isolated by spaces between lines and paragraphs, do not construct an archive; rather, they create a space of stillness and silence where literature can continue as powerful experience, a virtual meeting place for author and reader.<sup>716</sup>

As Tabbi sees it then, Markson's work still allows for—indeed, it requires—active construction by the reader. But this is not an activity that necessitates the murder of the author. In fact, the reader in this model (despite the passive terms in which Tabbi puts it) is active, and not merely, as Barth would have it, a 'space on which

<sup>714</sup> Tabbi, 'Solitary Inventions', p. 750.

<sup>715</sup> Ibid., p. 769. In *Vanishing Point*, Markson's Author 'still uses a typewriter instead of a computer' (27).

<sup>716</sup> Ibid., p. 767.

all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed', an entity 'without history, biography, psychology'.<sup>717</sup> Instead, the limits imposed on the text by the imposition of an author and by what the reader brings to it are precisely what make possible the 'powerful experience' of an encounter between two minds, between two people.

Markson's 2001 book, *This Is Not a Novel*, resembles *Reader's Block* in its format, in its metafictional nature, in its inclusion of unattributed quotations, and in its listing of facts about artists, writers, and cultural figures. Tabbi was mistaken in thinking that, with *Reader's Block*, Markson had reached 'the End of the Line'. *Reader's Block* may be 'a novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel', but even more is subtracted here. Tabbi's *Cognitive Fictions* was published in 2002 and contains little on *This Is Not a Novel*, probably since Markson's book appeared only in 2001. Surprisingly, rather than seeming to feel justified in his previous commitment to describe Markson's work as Minimalist, in *Cognitive Fictions* Tabbi shies away from using the term with regard to Markson's work. The remark about the 'minimalist narratives' in the manner of Beckett and Kafka shows up in a chapter about Paul Auster rather than Markson. I differ from Tabbi in ascribing even more importance to the Minimalism of Markson's work since the publication of *This Is Not a Novel*. In my view, the latter work represents not just an additional work in the mode of *Reader's Block*, but takes Markson further down the Minimalist path. Indeed, there is a distinct and direct progression of increasing Minimalism from *Wittgenstein's Mistress* to *This Is Not a Novel*. Furthermore, I will argue, this

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<sup>717</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 189.

progression, has its roots in Markson's earlier writings and literary influences, and Minimalism is the very method by which Markson enacts his renewal of both Modernism and the novel.

There is only one personage in *This Is Not a Novel*, Writer, rather than the two, Reader and Protagonist, in the previous book, and we are told Writer is not even to be considered a character, that the book has none (12-13). Writer has no encounters with others, however brief, and we are given no sense of setting whatsoever. Reader's attempts to set up novelistic situations for Protagonist, no matter how bare, tentative, fragmentary, and ultimately unresolved, are absent. Even the list of facts has a narrower focus. While a number of those in *Reader's Block* were about suicides, there was a range of other subjects as well. A much greater proportion of the facts in *This Is Not a Novel* involve deaths. Well over 500 of them are about the demise of artists, and there are many more deaths besides.

The model of the visual arts seems to be even more prominent in *This Is Not a Novel* than in *Reader's Block*. But it is in keeping with previous works. In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Kate thinks of Magritte in connection with certain types of questions:

Such as what floor is that toilet on, say, that is on the second floor of the house that does not have a second floor?

Or, where was my own house when all I was seeing was the smoke from my potbellied stove but was thinking, there is my house?

Certainly both of those questions are questions that could make one think about Magritte. (212)

Markson is clearly drawing on the association of Magritte with such intellectual puzzles by calling his book *This Is Not a Novel*, thus situating it in the tradition of Magritte's most famous work, a series of paintings bearing the words 'this is not a

pipe'. The cover of the first paperback edition of *This Is Not a Novel* even features a Magritte painting called *The Evening Gown*. Markson makes this context explicit in the book, when, as one of several such references scattered throughout the book, on page 138 he lists

*Ceci n'est pas un conte*. Diderot, 1772.  
*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Magritte, 1929.

The series in *This Is Not a Novel* includes mention of precursors to Hemingway, John Ashbery, and E. M. Forster: George Peele's 1590 version of *A Farewell to Arms*, and Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (91, 50); and an 1871 *Passage to India* (152). No doubt part of Markson's point is that the 'timeless "shared" continuity of human experience'<sup>718</sup> is reflected in the recurrence of titles. It is interesting that Markson is highlighting what might be seen as a lack of originality in art, just as Barthes did. But the reference to Markson's own precursors in both literature and the visual arts is worth exploring in more detail.

Diderot's 'This Is Not a Story' contains two narratives, one in which a good-hearted and hard-working man is deceived and cruelly exploited by his mistress, and another in which a heartless man discards the woman who has sacrificed all and for years toiled unflaggingly for him. These tales are set within a double frame. The first is established in a brief preface that both declares what is to follow a story and claims that it is nothing of the kind. The second frame is that described in the preface, the situation in which a tale is related by one person who is interrupted by another. Though the interruptions continue throughout, the exchange between storyteller and listener is set up in another prefatory section establishing a somewhat antagonistic relationship between the two figures. 'You seem to be in a bad mood', says the teller.

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<sup>718</sup> Lowry's *Volcano*, p. 4.

*I usually am. –It might be best if I kept my little story for another occasion. –You mean when I am not here? [...] Begin, for God's sake, begin. –I will try to be brief. –That will do no harm.*

Here, a little out of malice, I coughed, I spat, I took out my handkerchief, I blew my nose, I opened my snuffbox, I took a pinch of snuff; and I heard my good friend mutter, 'The story may be brief, but the preliminaries are certainly long'. It crossed my mind to call a servant and pretend to send him on an errand, but I refrained; and I began.<sup>719</sup>

There follows the heading 'This is not a story', and the first tale begins, peppered with interruptions that lead to discussions of the action as it is being related.

Diderot invokes the oral tradition by means of these frames, thus placing his story in an ancient lineage. The idea of personal relationship between author and audience is thus also very much in foreground in the Diderot, as it is in Markson.

According to P. N. Furbank, for Diderot, 'fiction signified not a story, but the spectacle of somebody telling a story'. Diderot's purpose is to ensure that 'a fiction will never be finally separable from its matrix in real life'.<sup>720</sup> In *This Is Not a Novel*, like *Reader's Block* before it, Markson similarly makes it difficult to draw the line between fiction and reality by 1) including numerous references to and facts about real people, and 2) by insisting that the work under question is at least to some degree autobiographical and including actual incidents from his own life.

Diderot's and Markson's titles are paradoxical. And paradox is the essence of Magritte's well-known series of paintings featuring the words 'ceci n'est pas une pipe'. The first of these, *L'usage de la parole I (The Use of Words I)* dates from 1928-29, and consists of the image of a pipe on a plain background with the words 'ceci n'est pas une pipe' below it. At least two others were painted in the mid-1960s: *L'air et la chanson (The Air and the Song)* in 1964, and *Les deux*

<sup>719</sup> Denis Diderot, 'This Is Not a Story', in *This Is Not a Story and Other Stories*, trans. P. N. Furbank (University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>720</sup> P. N. Furbank, Introduction to *This Is Not a Story and Other Stories*, pp. 9, 10.

*mystères* (*The Two Mysteries*) in 1966.<sup>721</sup> Each of the three paintings bears the image of a pipe to which one cannot help but apply the words because of their placement, since the words are immediately below the picture of the pipe. Of course the image *represents* a pipe, and we cannot accurately say that it *is* a pipe, yet the habits of speech allow us to say just such a thing.

Writing in 1967, Michel Foucault registers the confusion one of the paintings (from the description, *The Two Mysteries*) inspires. There, a picture similar to *The Use of Words I* rests on an easel set on wooden floorboards while another image of a pipe floats in space above it. Foucault writes that he is 'surprised to find [him]self confusing *being* and *representing* as if they were equivalent'.<sup>722</sup> This conundrum is just the sort over which Kate constantly mused in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, and which she associates with not only with Magritte, but also with Wittgenstein, as Suzi Gablik does the puzzles in Magritte's paintings.

Markson's title, *This Is Not a Novel*, operates similarly to the legend 'this is not a pipe' because it defies us to read his book as a novel, yet that is precisely what we do. The book is marketed under that category, is placed alongside other novels upon shelves in bookstores, and claims for its novel status appear on the cover.<sup>723</sup> Yet Markson also explicitly declares his intention to do away with all the features that make a book a novel. This begins immediately, with the first two lines telling us that 'Writer is pretty much tempted to quit writing' and 'Writer is weary unto death of making up stories' (1). The fourth statement in this metafictional thread (minus the interspersed facts and quotations) is 'A novel with

<sup>721</sup> Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 130-131.

<sup>722</sup> Foucault, 'This Is Not a Pipe', *Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology, Essential Works* Vol. 2, p. 188.

<sup>723</sup> Of the first paperback edition, at least.



no intimation of story whatsoever, Writer would like to contrive' (2). He wishes to dispense with characters, plot, action, sequence of events, passage of time, setting, description, motivation, conflict, confrontation, social themes, 'contemporary manners and/or morals', politics, symbols, and even a subject (2-9). With these gone, we might ask, how can one possibly have a novel? Yet he still wants to write one.

The last negative statement, the desire to create a work of art without a subject, is immediately followed by these remarks:

There is no work of art without a subject, said Ortega.

A novel tells a story, said E. M. Forster.

If you can do it, it ain't bragging, said Dizzy Dean. (10)

Markson has clearly set himself a challenge, that of writing a novel without any of the normally expected attributes of the novel, as listed above. The only novelistic qualities the book professes to have are a certain movement ('getting somewhere' despite there being no passage of time), 'a beginning, a middle, and an end', and 'a note of sadness at the end' (4). The primary concern, however, seems to be the goal of 'seducing the reader into turning pages'. These are, respectively, the minimal requirements on which Markson bases his novel, and his criterion of success.

To find a model for such an experiment in dispensing with the conventional appointments of his chosen form yet somehow continuing to work within it, Markson again looks to the visual arts. On the second page of *This Is Not a Novel*, we find the following passage:

When I was their age I could draw like Raphael. But it took me a lifetime to learn to draw like they do.

Said Picasso at an exhibition of children's art. (2)

Picasso is held up as an example of the skill required for artistic experiments that look deceptively easy. Later there is a similar reminder, again involving Picasso, of the fact that radical experimentation—or at least that of a worthy sort—comes from working within a tradition.

You can actually draw so beautifully. Why do you spend  
your time making all these queer things?  
Picasso: That's why. (156)

A few pages later, there is an echo of the lines above:

Writer has actually written some relatively traditional  
novels. Why is he spending his time doing this sort of thing?  
That's why. (164)

Markson wants us to see his fictional experiments as comparable to Picasso's in painting. He claims that they are distinctively modern in that, having been born of the tradition, they represent a further evolution of it.

Markson goes yet again to the visual arts for a model affirming the role of authorial intention in constituting the work.

*This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.*  
Said Robert Rauschenberg in a telegram to a Paris art  
gallery. (17)

Markson claims the same privilege, at first in a somewhat humorous manner that could indicate a degree of scepticism:

This is a novel if Writer or Robert Rauschenberg says so.  
(18)

But he reiterates the claim, more forcefully this time, in the first of a series of suggestions that continue throughout *This Is Not a Novel*.

This is even an epic poem, if Writer says so.  
Requiring no one's corroboration. (21)

About a dozen additional forms are listed as possibilities for *This Is Not a Novel*, each requiring (seemingly) only the author's say-so in order to be the case. Markson thus emphatically proclaims the author's agency in constituting a work

as a specific form. This is not only a declaration of autonomy drawn from the example of modern art, but also a response to arguments that affirm the reader as the source of a text's unity and deny 'the "message" of the Author-God'.<sup>724</sup>

Curiously enough, Markson stands firm against such assertions in a book that is ultimately about nothing if not the impending death of its author, and that could well be described as 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture', or as 'made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation'.<sup>725</sup>

Writer's apparent need to declare which form his work takes arises, as does that of Rauschenberg, from the experimental nature of that work. He repeats the description found in *Reader's Block*: 'Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage'. These attributes are 'Self-evident enough to scarcely need Writer's say-so' (128). But they are not what we expect to find in a traditional novel, and in themselves they do not serve as signposts saying 'this is a novel'. It is not immediately self-evident that *This Is Not a Novel* is a novel. Since Markson's book so little resembles a traditional novel, because it does not contain the usual features of a novel, Writer (or Robert Rauschenberg!) must *say* that it is one in order for it to be seen as such. Nevertheless, since it does exhibit some minimal characteristics of a novel—'getting somewhere' or having an element of progression, having a beginning, a middle, and an end—the designation of it as such is not a purely performative one. Markson's is not a dadaesque enterprise following in the tradition of Duchamp's *Fountain*: he does not give a lump of coal a title and declare it a novel.

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<sup>724</sup> Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', pp. 189, 188.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid., pp. 188, 189.

The possibility that his work might be one of the dozen or so other forms Writer comes up with similarly have some basis in the text. 'This is also even an autobiography, if Writer says so' immediately follows these sentences:

Your last novel was a flop. You've got two wonderful children depending on you. Don't you think it's time to consider doing something more financially responsible in your life? (53)

In his 'Postface to Several Novels', Markson, who has two children, related the fact that a friend of his told him as much.<sup>726</sup> Other autobiographical incidents include two surrounding the death of Dylan Thomas, whom Markson knew personally: a sighting of William Faulkner at Thomas's funeral, and Malcolm Lowry's remarks on the poet's death in a letter to Markson (161, 163). One particularly apt claim, it seems to me, is that *This Is Not a Novel* is 'a disquisition on the maladies of the life of art' (86), since much of it consists of a list of the death and suffering of artists. Several proposed forms highlight the fact that Markson sees his work in the context of Modernist literary experimentation. It may be 'a sequence of cantos awaiting numbering' (23), 'an ersatz prose alternative to *The Waste Land*' (101), or Writer's 'own synthetic personal *Finnegans Wake*' (185).

There is evidence that these are serious suggestions. Anne Beattie referred to *Reader's Block* as 'a fictional sequel to Eliot's *The Waste Land*'. In a letter to Joseph Tabbi regarding Beattie's remark, Markson confirms her insight:

For all the talk about my technique, and/or the theme of loneliness, in simple fact all of these 'intellectual tidbits, quotes, etc., horrors, deaths, condemnations, self-destructions, etc. etc. that do span the whole modern world, and more—do represent a view, a vision, whatever one might call it. ... The book was *meant* to be a sort of poem. And "The Waste Land" ... was it, at least indirectly.<sup>727</sup>

<sup>726</sup> Markson, 'Reviewers in Flat Heels', p. 124.

<sup>727</sup> Tabbi, letter from Markson to the author, 1 June 1999, *Cognitive Fictions*, p. 151, n. 6. Ellipses in Tabbi.

While this might seem to undercut my assertions that Markson isolates something basic about the genre of the novel, it does suggest that his aim is now the most fundamental of reductions (whether in the medium of novel, or poem, or autobiography). What remain essential are the conversation between author and reader and the creative impulse that drives formal innovation.

It is clear from Markson's remarks in his study of Lowry's book that his early literary enthusiasms are the source of his recent experiments. There he asks regarding *Finnegans Wake*, 'Can this wealth of prototypal allusion, which after all evokes nothing if not the essence of man's creative tradition—which *is* man—be integrated into a fictional form that is itself traditional?' The answer? 'After Joyce, it can'.<sup>728</sup>

While Markson draws upon the models of Joyce and Eliot, among others, for his referential Minimalist novels, the end result is decidedly individualistic. It is difficult, even, to apply the word 'allusive' to these books. Markson's direct references to many artists count as allusion only when loosely defined, and his numerous unattributed quotations are not precisely allusions, either.<sup>729</sup> Even if we do consider them as such, they function rather differently than did Eliot's. I. A. Richards said that, without the 'technical device for compression' that allusion constitutes, *The Waste Land* would have run to the epic length of twelve books.<sup>730</sup> In Markson, each reference or allusion or unattributed quotation is employed as an item in its own right, held up for contemplation as it enters into relationship with others of its kind. These items are not intended, however, to evoke the entire

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<sup>728</sup> Lowry's *Volcano*, p. 6.

<sup>729</sup> In an article called 'What Is an Allusion?', William Irwin offers the following definition: 'a reference that is indirect in the sense that it calls for associations that go beyond mere substitution of a referent. An author must intend this indirect reference, and it must be in principle possible that the intended audience could detect it'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59:3 (Summer 2001), p. 293.

<sup>730</sup> Richards, 'The Poetry of T. S. Eliot', pp. 290-291.

works to which they belong. Instead, *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel* invoke artistic tradition in general, as an entity in itself. The reader benefits by familiarity with the works and artists that appear in them, but even without such familiarity, the facts about their deaths and their creative efforts can still be appreciated.

The epigraph to *This Is Not a Novel* is from Swift's *Tale of a Tub*: 'I am now trying an Experiment very frequent among Modern Authors; which is, to *write upon Nothing*'. The goal of writing about nothing is one that had been sanctioned by two of Markson's own Modernist forebears. In 'Malcolm Lowry: A Reminiscence', Markson relates an incident that occurred during a meeting he arranged in 1954 between Lowry and Conrad Aiken, who had not seen one another for nineteen years.

Aiken asked Lowry what he had been writing. In rough form at the moment was the novel, *October Ferry to Gabriola*. For some minutes Lowry endeavored to summarize its nonexistent plot, after which: 'Well, nothing happens. Nothing should, in a novel.' Whereupon Aiken, whose *Blue Voyage* Lowry readily acknowledged as the critical influence on his own concept of fictional subjectivity: 'No. No *incidents*'.<sup>731</sup>

In dispensing with plot, action, sequence of events, conflict, etc., Markson is in a sense following in the tradition of Lowry and Aiken.

Nevertheless, *This Is Not a Novel* does fulfil the promise made in its early pages to have an ending, and furthermore, to end on a note of sadness. Writer has had a heart attack, we learn a few pages before the end, and a 'right-lung lobectomy and resected ribs' (186, 188). On the same page as the latter revelation are found statements by the ancient writers Pindar, Horace, and Ovid to the effect

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<sup>731</sup> Markson, 'Malcolm Lowry: A Reminiscence', *Lowry's Volcano*, p. 224.

that they will live on through their art. A page later, there is a return to some of the defining features of the novel and Markson's defiance of them:

It is the business of the novelist to create characters.  
Said Alphonse Daudet.

Action and plot may play a minor part in a modern novel,  
but they cannot be entirely dispensed with.  
Said Ortega.

If you can do it, it ain't bragging.

The implication, of course, is that Markson has accomplished what he set out to do. He has written a novel without characters, action, or plot. Yet, something more basic even than the novelistic genre lies at the heart of Markson's experiment:

Or was it possibly nothing more than a fundamentally  
recognizable genre all the while, no matter what Writer averred?

Nothing more or less than a *read*?

Simply an unconventional, generally melancholy though  
sometimes even playful now-ending read?

That is, 'seducing the reader into turning pages' (3), engaging and keeping the reader's interest in the writing, whatever its form, is of the essence. This is the fundamental contract between writer and reader, the connection between one person writing, saying something, and another reading, or listening, the encounter between two people that is an abiding source of literary value, notwithstanding poststructuralist theory.

The personal element is what allows the note of sadness, over and above that sounded by the book's listing of deaths, to resonate at the end. On the final page, Writer reveals that he has cancer. His last line has the effect of a personal leave-taking addressed to the reader: 'Farewell and be kind' (190). This ending is a gentler one than that of *Reader's Block*. There we find an expression of despair

with regard to the proper appreciation of the artist's work, and particularly, perhaps, that of an experimental artist.

Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.

Wastebasket. (RB 196)

This 'wastebasket' is the final word of the book, and the vision is as stark as that at the end of *Going Down*, where Steve Chance's writings were reduced to the status of toilet paper.

The ending of *This Is Not a Novel* is far more satisfying, and it is overall a more successful book. *This Is Not a Novel* improves over *Reader's Block* in part by virtue of its more stringent Minimalism. The reduction of themes, personae, and even (potential) narrative lines makes for a tauter, more focused book. The reading process is one that follows directly through to the end: *This Is Not a Novel* is indeed difficult to put down. The atomistic structure fosters the desire to keep reading, for one can always justify an additional moment or two for just one more tiny paragraph, then one more, then another....

*Vanishing Point*, published in 2004, has the same format as *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*. The first book featured Reader and Protagonist and the second Writer. *Vanishing Point* has Author, and opens with the line: 'Author has finally started to put his notes into manuscript form' (1). This book, which the cover tells us is a novel,<sup>732</sup> is also metafictional, but it is focused on the process Author goes through in composing it rather than on issues of genre. There are occasional statements about the novel's form, but these are nearly exact quotations from *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*. For instance, early on in *Vanishing*

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<sup>732</sup> First printing, in paperback, by Shoemaker and Hoard, Washington, D.C., 2004.



*Point* we find the now familiar ‘Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage’ (12) and ‘A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel’ (13). Whereas these terms and descriptions were first presented in *Reader’s Block* in question form, they are established as positive statements, repeated in all three books.

Author’s activity highlights the assembled, collage-like nature of the book. He describes the collection of index cards on which he has made his notes, and the fact that he has been sorting them in search of the correct order. Next in the process is the act of typing the manuscript. Author does not use a computer, we learn, but a manual typewriter for which he increasingly has difficulty finding supplies and repair shops. The outmoded equipment he uses seems an analogy for his worn-out body. Author is old, and apparently in poor health. He describes his feebleness and implies that he is near to death.

*Vanishing Point* ends with the word ‘*Selah*’ (191). Some pages earlier, we are told that the meaning of the word is unknown, but it ‘marks the ends of verses in the Psalms’ (178). Author wishes that it ‘might stand for some ultimate effacement’, and ends up decreeing that it is so: he ‘personally endows it with—a terminal desolation and despair’, and warns us to ‘Beware *Selah*’ (178). We have been prepared for his death by comments on his weakening physical and mental powers. Author claims as well to have seen an ‘extraordinary flooding’ of bright light (190), which is likely meant to bring to mind the light reported seen by those who have nearly been very close to death but recovered. So when the word appears as the last in the book, with its designated suggestion of ‘ultimate effacement’ and its ‘terminal’ powers, it seems to mark the death of Author—the point at which he vanishes.

The warning to 'Beware *Selah*' might be taken as a caution to beware of the sort of 'ultimate effacement' of the author in the theories of Barthes and Foucault. Perhaps the point is that such ceding of agency leads to 'terminal desolation and despair'. On the other hand, perhaps the several deaths in Markson's last three novels, Author's repeated literary suicide, represent the ultimate declaration of agency. But willing his own death, Author has taken control of it, and, paradoxically, has confirmed the Life of the Author.

If *Vanishing Point* in any way represents an advance on the Minimalism of *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*, it is in that the narrator is less obtrusive. With a reduction in his presence, there is less of the novel portion of book, and this is made explicit. Near the middle, Author mentions his 'experiment to see how little of his own presence he can get away with throughout' (93). This is in keeping with the theme of 'effacement' I have mentioned. Author is slowly receding until he appears not much more than some of the subjects of the comments that make up the rest of the book. He will soon take his place among the dead artists and authors who are the subject of most of the novel, like Keats, who believed that he would 'be among the English poets' after his death.<sup>733</sup> In fact, as I suggested above, Author is active in his pursuit of such status.

The most successful and affecting of Markson's demises is that in his second Minimalist novel. By the time we reach the end of *This Is Not a Novel*, and have been presented with the news of Writer's illness and impending death, we receive it as though it were happening to someone we know. We have entered into the conversation with Writer—with Markson. His leave-taking, 'Farewell, and be kind', has the flavour of a benediction bestowed upon us by one who is wise, by

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<sup>733</sup> This remark is quoted, though not attributed, in *Reader's Block*, p. 124.

an artist from among those of the great tradition whose names adorn the pages of the novel. The protagonists in Markson's recent novels are almost unbearably lonely, but they attempt to assuage their condition by bringing to mind all those with whom they feel an affinity as artists. As Christopher Ricks has observed, 'art always constitutes company',<sup>734</sup> and this has rarely been so well illustrated as in Markson. 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone', wrote Eliot. 'His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists'.<sup>735</sup> Markson has placed himself squarely in relation to the dead poets and artists by invoking them by name. He has also introduced something new, and thus altered 'the ideal order' of existing works. By means of Minimalism, Markson has succeeded in renewing tradition in a particularly Modernist way.

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<sup>734</sup> Christopher Ricks, 'Loneliness and Poetry', *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 262.

<sup>735</sup> Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood* (new York: Barnes and Noble, 1928), p. 49.

## CONCLUSION

Minimalism is a feature of American writing in the twentieth century that admits a variety of approaches. It is a mode adopted by poets, novelists, and short story writers, and even within the genres there is diversity in Minimalism. In this Conclusion, I will touch upon additional writing that further demonstrates the range and vitality of Minimalist writing today. Before doing so, I first want to briefly address two issues: the value of Minimalist literature, and the theme of realism I have been tracing throughout this thesis.

Minimalism is sometimes criticised for being trivial or insubstantial. Some art critics will say that the Minimalist artist hasn't put enough work into the construction of a piece, that no skill is required for such production, or that there is no 'art' there.<sup>736</sup> The denunciation in Congress of Aram Saroyan's 'light' as a waste of money given to fund the arts is one example of the sort of negative reaction literary Minimalism sometimes provokes. Robert Creeley is not immune to such criticism, even from those who find his work worthy of their own scholarly efforts. Arthur Ford suggests that Creeley has 'limited' himself, excluded himself from consideration as a 'major' poet because he has chosen to work in a Minimalist mode.<sup>737</sup> Lynn Keller speaks of Creeley's later work as 'a wearisome repetition of the humdrum', limited by 'intellectual indolence, banality, and a hackneyed style'.<sup>738</sup> The outcry against the Minimalism of Carver, Robison, and others that I detailed in Chapter 3 offers a further example of the critical bias against Minimalist fiction. In a similar vein, Beverly Haviland has

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<sup>736</sup> See Richard Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, p. 395, and James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, p. 81.

<sup>737</sup> Ford, *Robert Creeley*, p. 138.

<sup>738</sup> Keller, pp. 180, 181.

remarked that she hopes that, like Hawthorne, Lydia Davis ‘will also make a chance discovery in the Custom House that frees her considerable talent from regulating the merely mundane’.<sup>739</sup> The failure of some critics and readers to take Minimalism seriously can result in the idea that Minimalist authors themselves do not take it seriously, and are merely engaged in experimenting for experiment’s sake.

However, the commitment of some of the authors I’ve discussed here to working and re-working a specific literary mode counters such charges. The decades-long devotion of Robert Lax to his Minimalist poetry indicates the importance he attached to it. Lydia Davis, too, has produced writing in a Minimalist mode for several decades now. David Markson chose Minimalism after working in more traditional forms. He made an informed decision to work in that way as best suited to his literary aims. In this thesis, I have established the commitment of these authors to a Minimalist mode. Such literary dedication deserves serious consideration. But the substance of the case I have made for these writers rests on their preoccupation with ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, and on the concomitant questions raised about language and the status of literature.

The pervasive themes of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ in the work and remarks of Minimalists suggest to me an underlying anxiety about language and the status of literature as a language-based art. There is an anxiety about the capacity of language to be truthful, to convey, in some way, knowledge or information about what is real. In some cases, the concern or desire is for literary language, and language in general, to more accurately reflect that which is perceived as ‘real’. The way in which reality is conceived may take different forms. It could be the

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<sup>739</sup> Beverly Haviland, ‘Missed Connections’, *Partisan Review* 56 (Winter 1989), p. 154.

empirical reality Hemingway sought to portray in his early work, or the abstract reality Lax tried to instantiate in the world by means of his poetry. In both cases, the issue was that of the relation between language and the real, of making literature accountable to the real.

At other times, or for other writers, there is an effort to make of literature itself something real, something that takes its place in the world alongside other things. One way Minimalists have dealt with this anxiety, I would argue, is by stressing the material or sensible aspects of literature, and its construction—the machine made of words—as a thing, an object. That which exists in its own right possesses a status as real that somehow validates its existence, and frees it from concerns about its truthfulness. Conceiving of literary artworks as objects, or focusing on their material aspects, does not constitute a turning away from the problem of truth in literature, but is rather a strategy for addressing it.

Making language real, or making it relate to the real, is a way of validating literature, of securing its place in the world. Minimalists take a radical approach to the problem, reducing literature to that which is essential in order to find a solid foundation for it. The strong tradition of Minimalism I have delineated in this thesis suggests that the status of language and literature were particular causes for anxiety in the context of twentieth-century America. Its continuation into the twenty-first century suggests that the anxiety has not yet been resolved.

Very brief prose forms have enjoyed popularity in the last two decades. Short-short stories are not necessarily Minimalist, although they are arguably Minimalist in scale. But the popularity of the form shows an interest in reduction of scale on the part of both writers and readers. The volume *Sudden Fiction* is a

collection of stories 'from one to five pages long', most of which were first published in the 1980s, by American authors.<sup>740</sup> An International collection of short shorts was published by Norton in 1989, who brought out a similar collection called *Flash Fiction* in 1992. The Coffee House Press produced a series of short-short story collections in the 1990s. A book of creative nonfiction, *In Short*, was published in 1996. The essays that appeared there were 'chosen first and foremost for their economy'.<sup>741</sup>

*Excitability* (1998) contains more than 100 of Diane Williams's short-short stories that were previously published in three volumes over a period of ten years.<sup>742</sup> Williams's stories are Minimalist in scale, and have a dream-like atmosphere that is often the result of their Minimalist narrative development. Many of Williams's sentences are flat and matter of fact. This contributes to the surrealistic feel of the stories because each sentence seems oddly disconnected from the others. 'I Am a Learned Person' begins:

My name is Valery Plum. There is something funny in that. I cannot presume how true to life I am. When I see myself combing my hair, I seem true to life. I am so starkly represented.<sup>743</sup>

The effect is one of a strange randomness, which is partially achieved by reduction. If the final two sentences were combined and the word 'because' added, the result would be 'When I see myself combing my hair, I seem true to life because I am so starkly represented'. In this case, the second part of the sentence explains the first. But in Williams's original, the statement 'I am so

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<sup>740</sup> Robert Shepard and James Thomas, eds., *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1986), p. xiii.

<sup>741</sup> Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones, eds., *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996). The quotation is from the preface by Bernard Cooper, p. 21.

<sup>742</sup> Diane Williams, *Excitability: Selected Stories, 1986-1996* (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 1998).

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

starkly represented' stands on its own. It suggests the metafictional element that is occasionally present in her stories, although sometimes, as in this case, the metafiction itself may be an illusion.

Williams edits a little magazine called *Noon*, which features short-short fiction, and regularly publishes Lydia Davis. The influence of both Davis and Williams is in evidence in the stories that appear in the journal. A nice example of Minimalist writing from *Noon* is Geoff Bouvier's single-paragraph 'Like It Was Going to Be'.<sup>744</sup> The story proper consists of four italicised sentences that are surrounded by and alternated with five sentences offering a metafictional commentary. The story begins:

The clearest stories, strung bell-like back from inevitable conclusions, light a present moment to its peaceful end. *When he woke up sober she was gone.* These stories, if they are justified and complete, begin at home—at the end—and return to lead the troubled moment back toward the narrative's restful place.

A few lines later it continues, 'This end-light shines as darkly as a kind of lack, the lack of alternatives that is called inevitability'. The reduction of possibility that results from beginning a story at its end is Minimalist in character. Bouvier's focus on structure brings to mind Davis's *The End of the Story* and 'The Center of the Story'. The last of the italicised sentences reads: '*Only an impression in the bed was left to hold him*', which leads back to the 'restful place' of the bed and the end of the relationship.

The prolific experimental artist Richard Kostelanetz works in a variety of forms and media that include Minimalist fiction as well as sound poetry, numerical literature, videotape, holography, and conceptual art. His creative work appears primarily in little magazines and in editions by small presses, including

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<sup>744</sup> *Noon* 3 (2003), pp. 67-68.



his own Future Press and Archae Editions.<sup>745</sup> According to Larry McCaffery, Kostelanetz's experiments are 'united by a common concern with discovering what the essence of a genre, form, technological process, or style should be or do'.<sup>746</sup>

Kostelanetz explores these issues by combination, in his 'intermedia' work such as video poetry, or by Minimalist reduction. The latter strategy as well as the former can result in genre confusion. For example, Kostelanetz's *Three Element Stories*<sup>747</sup> appear to be visual poems made of three words. The elements are not placed in a conventional arrangement starting at the top left-hand corner of the page and proceeding to the right and then down to the next line. Each word appears on any portion of the page, typefaces and sizes vary, and the letters of the words often do not follow a straight line. The presence of a full stop on the page marks them out as fiction rather than poetry by indicating an implied sentence, and therefore fictional narrative.<sup>748</sup> But the words do not form a grammatically complete sentence. One, for example, consists of 'partnership', 'antagonism', and 'complicity'. Kostelanetz has provided only the minimal elements of a sentence. It is up to the reader to engage with the words and actively construct the story.

The idea that the sentence is the minimal unit of fiction also informs Kostelanetz's series of single-sentence stories. In other work, he begins with the notion that narrative is a dynamic form involving sequential development (a quality he finds in the sentence). Thus his 'Constructs' are stories with no words.

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<sup>745</sup> Kostelanetz has exhibited a long-term commitment to Minimalist literature, although he does work in other modes. While I find the ideas that inform his Minimalist work interesting, the work itself doesn't, in my opinion, live up to the standards of that by other authors discussed at greater length in this thesis.

<sup>746</sup> McCaffery, 'Alternative, Possibility, and Essence: An Interview with Richard Kostelanetz', *Some Other Frequency*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>747</sup> New York: Archae, 1998.

<sup>748</sup> Kostelanetz stressed this point in an interview I conducted with him in August 2001.

Instead, they are configurations of lines that systematically change according to a certain principle. The titles of some of these stories suggest the process, for example, 'Squares Squared', 'Ingrowth', and 'Partitions'.<sup>749</sup> These Minimalist stories are reduced so far that they do not have words or written characters, but they retain the essential prerequisite for narrative because they develop. *In the Beginning: A Novella*,<sup>750</sup> starts with a single letter 'A' on the first page. On the second, the 'A' rests atop two 'B's in a triangular formation, and in the third three 'C's support the previous triangle. This pattern of increase continues until the middle of the alphabet, when the number of letters begins to decrease.

Kostelanetz also writes Minimalist poetry. He regards poetry as static and centred on the image; it therefore differs essentially from fiction. 'After Hawthorne' (1967) makes use of the title, as many Minimalist and visual poems do, in order to achieve its full potential. Although the poem itself, which consists of a very large, blocky capital letter 'A', appears in black ink in *Imaged Words and Worded Images*,<sup>751</sup> one imagines it in the scarlet version worn by Hester Prynne. 'Tributes to Henry Ford' features the letters 'A' and 'T' representing early model automobiles negotiating traffic patterns.

The page is a compositional unit in Kostelanetz's book of poetry *Fields, Turfs, Pitches, Arenas* (1979). There the page provides a seven-inch square space or 'field' for the presentation of each poem. The first group of poems are made up of four words, such as 'memory', 'retrieval', 'selectivity', and 'chronology', arranged along the edges of the page, beginning from each corner. In the second group the number of words increases to eight, and finally there are sixteen words

<sup>749</sup> The first two are from *More Short Fictions* (New York: Assembling, 1980), n.p., and the third is from *Constructs: Stories* (Reno, Nevada: West Coast Poetry Review, 1975), n.p.

<sup>750</sup> Somerville, Massachusetts: Abyss, 1971.

<sup>751</sup> New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970.

per poem, set up in four squares per page. The spatial arrangement is meant to facilitate relationships between the words that would not be possible in a sequential, linear poem. It also emphasises the static quality Kostelanetz regards as essential to poetry. The words stand in a relationship to one another that can be interpreted differently, but there is no crucial temporal aspect to this relationship (of course, reading or viewing them does take place in time). Some of the poems are composed along thematic lines, with subjects such as the city, excessive or inane language use, rituals, spaces, attitudes, and emotions. In other poems, the relations between the words are based on verbal similarity, such as a group of words ending in 'ite', starting with 'ar,' or including 'angl'; these exhibit the 'language process' Dan Jaffe says in the preface that he finds prominent in the poems.<sup>752</sup>

The 'Solos' in Kostelanetz's *Solos, Duets, Trios, Choruses* (1991)<sup>753</sup> consist of words partitioned into the smaller words that occur within them; one of the words Kostelanetz finds in 'psychotherapist,' for example, is 'rapist'. These poems are Minimalist in unit, based on reduction of words to their elements, to the units they comprise. The 'Duets' of the book's title are two capitalized words in large type presented next to one another. The typographical presentation lends itself to the visual relationship Kostelanetz wants us to see between the words in addition to any semantic resonance we may find. There are visual and sonic echoes in pairs such as 'DIMINISH' and 'MINISTER', while 'BLOOD' coupled with 'YEAST' and 'HIRSUTE' with 'PINBALL' are striking by virtue of contrast. 'Trios' are constructed on the same principles, but with three elements, while 'Choruses' are poems made of handwritten words forming a circle. The

<sup>752</sup> Jaffe, Introduction to *Fields, Turfs, Pitches, Arenas* (Kansas City, Missouri: BkMk, 1979), p. 4.

<sup>753</sup> New York: Future Press, 1991.

groupings are organised similarly to those in *Fields, Turfs, Pitches, Arenas*, by theme or partial orthographic similarity.

In 2002, writer and independent publisher Crag Hill put out a collection called *The Largeness the Small is Capable of*, the publication of which 'was sparked by the surge of short poems reaching print starting in the mid-1980s'.<sup>754</sup> 'This surge', Hill says, 'has not let up as of August 2001'. Hill points out that the short poem is not a new phenomenon, and he mentions the Imagist and Objectivist movements, but notes that 'under the sheer number of [short] poems being written lay the question *why so many now?*'<sup>755</sup>

Variety characterises Hill's anthology, the only requirement for admission being length of no more than five lines (though this is not adhered to without exception). Although such poems may be reduced according to some accepted norm, a poem is not Minimalist simply because it has no more than five lines, and Hill's is a collection of 400 poems of five lines or less, not of Minimalist poems. As Liz Was argues in 'Some Short Comments on the Shortshortpoem' (one of group of statements on the form at the end of Hill's volume), defining a short-short poem by the number of lines 'skirts the essence of the form, focusing on quantity when quiddity is what's at hand' (68).

Nevertheless, many of the poems in *The Largeness the Small Is Capable Of* can be considered Minimalist. Eight of the poets discussed by Bob Grumman in 'Mnmlst Poetry: Unacclaimed but Flourishing',<sup>756</sup> are published by Hill: Michael Basinski, John M. Bennett, Jonathan Brannen, Ed Conti, jwcurry, Geof Huth, Richard Kostelanetz, and John Martone, plus Grumman himself. Grumman

<sup>754</sup> Note that this is about the same time short-short fiction began to become popular.

<sup>755</sup> Crag Hill, Introduction to *The Largeness the Small is Capable of*, Score 16, p. 1. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>756</sup> Bob Grumman, 'Mnmlst Poetry'.

traces the Minimalist poem to dada and Imagism in the twenties, and cites Concrete poetry as an important contributor to its development. He doesn't go far toward defining Minimalist poetry, opting instead to focus on identifying its types and discussing particular instances. But he does say that 'its aim is to get its job done in as few words as possible—generally but not always through the use of visual techniques'.<sup>757</sup>

In 2004, Grumman published an anthology of 'pwoermds' edited by Geof Huth, &<sup>2</sup>, or *Ampersand Squared*.<sup>758</sup> 'Pwoermd' is Huth's coinage for a titleless one-word poem. The Canadian poet bp Nichol's contribution to this collection is 'em ty'. One of Karl Kempton's is 'on((((i))))on'. These one-word pieces are Minimalist poems based on the assumption that poetry is essentially creative play with language, or that the essential purpose of the poem is to present an image. Although Nichol and Kempton are not among them, many of the authors published in Huth's collection are also in Hill's. In fact, a poetic community that appreciates and practices Minimalism seems to be growing, a phenomenon I will return to shortly.

Jonathan Brannen is represented by six poems in *The Largeness the Small Is Capable of*, four of which are only one word long: 'nowledge', 'noom', 'decapitalism', and 'splace' (9). These fall into Grumman's large category of 'infra-verbal' poems (the other being 'pluraesthetic').<sup>759</sup> 'Splace' is specifically identified by Grumman as an instance of the 'fusional' variety of infra-verbal poems, in which 'words are combined [...] to create implicit metaphors, in this case the splash/splice of a space's becoming a place'. 'Splace', along with the other three, could also be described in Grumman's terms as 'mutational' poems,

<sup>757</sup> Grumman, 'Mnmlst Poetry'.

<sup>758</sup> Port Charlotte, Florida: Runaway Spoon Press, 2004, n.p.

<sup>759</sup> Grumman, 'Mnmlst Poetry'.

because they ‘deviate only mildly from normal spelling’. ‘Nowledge’ may be fusional as well. In fact, considering it as a combination of the words ‘now’ and ‘ledge’ implies the attempt to reach beyond the threshold of the present with knowledge. In the brightness of noon, we find its opposite, that emblem of night, the moon, spelled backwards: ‘noom’. ‘Decapitalism’ suggests a process, but also hints at the ‘deca-dence’ of capitalist culture, and perhaps to ‘decapitation’ as well.

An example that fits into what Grumman calls ‘fissional’ poetry, which splits the atomic unit of the word, is supplied by jwcurry’s ‘qaani lore #8: first breath’ (16):

oxy  
/  
gen  
/  
esis

The middle syllable functions much like the economical ‘hinge’ word I described in Creeley and Saroyan’s poetry.<sup>760</sup> In combining two words as well as splitting them, the poem is fusional as well as fissional.

Brannen’s ‘Zero’ (9) cancels itself out, while remaining in place:

something that  
says nothing

nothing that  
says something

Like Kostelanetz’s poem, it is static, as is Brannen’s final poem in the collection, which consists of three words (or two words and one particle) and only three letters (9):

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<sup>760</sup> The hinge or pivot was also used by William Carlos Williams and the Objectivists. See Kenneth Cox on the *kate kotoba* in Niedecker (‘The Poems of Lorine Niedecker’, pp. 173-174) and Peter Quartermain on the *apo koino* in Williams and Zukofsky (‘Actual Word Stuff’, pp. 107-109).

one  
neo  
eon

Read vertically, in columns rather than lines, the poem is the same. This feature could have been enhanced by presentation in square format, with the spaces between the letters on each line equalling those between the lines themselves. Such visual enhancement seems unlikely to be costly, and leaves one curious as to why Hill did not print it in that fashion. Edmund Conti's 'On and Off' goes beyond mere typographical manipulation. It consists of two circles of equal size, side by side, in the left of which sits a lowercase 'n'. The left, then, forms the word 'on', the circle becoming an 'o', while the right, by virtue of its juxtaposition with the other, has no 'n' 'on' it, and can therefore be read as 'off' (14).

Richard Kostelanetz contributes a series of eight one-word poems to *The Largeness the Small Is Capable Of*. His method here is to present the words in isolation, with no visual enhancement or spelling deviations. We are presented with a 'Menu', and asked to consider 'Limits' and look at a 'Telescope' (31). Minimalist work tends to require active participation from the reader, and in this case the level of the requirement is raised. Thom Schramm goes even further (perhaps) than the one-word poem, by publishing one with no words called 'THE TITLE OF THIS POEM LEAVES EVERYTHING TO BE DESIRED' (47).

The presentation of the title in capital letters brings to mind Grenier's title-only poems, and Grenier himself appears in Hill's collection. Huth published three of Aram Saroyan's one-word poems in &<sup>2</sup>. Neither Saroyan nor Grenier can boast a large readership. Grenier's recent work is famously inaccessible, and Saroyan ceased producing Minimalist work more than 35 years ago. But as I noted in

Chapter 2, Saroyan's and Grenier's Minimalist writing has found a new home on the Internet. The medium is one that in some ways suits the work, and Minimalist work itself is arguably well suited to it. Reading long texts online is tiring and tedious, and short, visually stimulating literature avoids the problem of reader fatigue. The availability of the work of Saroyan and Grenier online means that they have a potential audience that is very large indeed. There is, in fact, renewed interest in Minimalist poetry, and the World Wide Web seems to have facilitated discussion of it in the community of Minimalist poets and their readers I mentioned previously. For example, Minimalism, including the work of Saroyan and Grenier, is talked about on the weblogs of Crag Hill, Geoff Huth, and Bob Grumman.

Neither Saroyan nor Grenier set out to create work for digital consumption. But some poets do work in digital forms, and digital poetry tends to be related to Concrete and or Minimalist work. The strong pull toward reduction in Concrete poetry suggests that it is closely related to Minimalism. Despite the fact that academics continue to slight Concrete poetry,<sup>761</sup> in the burgeoning world of literature on the World Wide Web its legacy is evident. Kenneth Goldsmith, the founder of UbuWeb, the premier site for historical and contemporary Concrete, Visual and Sound poetry and poetics on the World Wide Web, remarks that 'the pioneers of Concrete poetry could only dream of the now-standard tools used to make language move and morph, stream and scream, distributed worldwide instantaneously at little cost'.<sup>762</sup> Because of its availability in this widely

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<sup>761</sup> This may be changing quickly. According to Kenneth Goldsmith, the influential Marjorie Perloff has claimed that Concrete poetry is 'hot' in academic circles. See Goldsmith, 'From (Command) Line to (Iconic) Constellation', *UbuWeb: Papers*, [www.ubu.com/papers/goldsmith\\_command.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/goldsmith_command.html).

<sup>762</sup> UbuEditor [Kenneth Goldsmith], 'UbuWeb Wants to Be Free', *UbuWeb: Papers*, [www.ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com).



disseminated format, which offers the attractions of colour, movement, and sound, digital compositions are in an excellent position to influence future developments in poetry.

Just how important in literary terms digital poetry (or work in any genre) will become remains to be seen, of course, and I am unwilling to vouch for the quality of Web poetry in general. Instead, I will briefly suggest, by means of a few examples, the way in which poets working in electronic forms gesture back toward Concrete poetry as they explore the literary possibilities of a still-new technology, and the way in which these works are also Minimalist. The works I have chosen demonstrate the way in which digital poetry furthers the project of Concrete poetry, but they especially show the way in which the Minimalist principles of the latter are carried over into the electronic realm.

Duc Thuan's one-word, three-letter 'She' (2000)<sup>763</sup> is a contemporary reworking of Pedro Xisto's 'Epithalamium II' (1967).<sup>764</sup> Xisto's poem consists of a large letter 'S', in the upper curve of which rests a lowercase 'h'; in the lower sits an 'e'. The 'S' thus appears to cradle the word 'he' in a maternal, benevolent gesture. However, a gloss accompanies the poem, identifying the 'h' as 'homo', the 'e' as 'eva' and the 'S' as 'serpens'. With this information, the 'S' acquires a sinister aspect. It separates man from woman, their only paths out leading them in opposite directions. In Than's version, a flamboyant, curvaceous 'S', in shadings ranging from nearly white to nearly red, initially stands before the smaller, blockier 'h' and 'e', forming the word 'She'. The 'S' tips forward and the other letters change from bright green to purple, then to blue. As the 'S' continues to spiral, catching the 'e' in one of its crooks and spinning gracefully away with it,

<sup>763</sup> Duc Thuan, 'She', *Wr-eye-tings Scratchpad*,  
<http://www.burningpress.org/wreyeting/tran/she.html>.

<sup>764</sup> Pedro Xisto, 'Epithalamium II', in Solt, ed., p. 114.

the 'h' loses colour, becomes white, and careens awkwardly onto its side. No gloss explains, but the divisive 'S' surely represents woman rather than serpent. Her feminine sinuosity intoxicates man, breaks him (or his 'he'art), sunders him from or strips away his 'e'go, and sends what's left of him reeling, while she makes off with the vowel.

The words 'yes' and 'no' form the sole verbal content of Dan Waber's 'Argument', one of his *Strings* series. When the piece is opened, the vibrating image of a string stretches horizontally across the screen. The movement increases and the string pulls to the left and twists itself into the shape of the word 'yes' in cursive. It then pulls in the other direction, losing the shape of the first word, and forming a 'no' on the right. The action repeats, the tension between the opposed positions truly visible. In 'Flirt', a string-formed 'no' floats in from the left and slowly unravels, metamorphosing into what is just becoming recognizable as 'maybe' before it disappears off to the right. Waber reduces his vocabulary even further for 'Flirt (contd)', to one affirmative word. 'Yes' lingers around the edges, exposing itself only partially at first, but enough is glimpsed for it to be recognisable. It then flashes briefly into full view as it speeds diagonally across the space. Becoming bolder, it finally comes to the middle of the space, only to coyly spin upside down and zoom off into the distance. It soon returns, and increases the intimacy by moving in a bit closer. 'Youandme' describes contrasting personalities, or a relationship, with only two words. 'You' proceeds across the screen from left to right and back (pausing in the centre) in a stately manner, maintaining a steady horizontal path. Meanwhile, 'me' zooms in and out in all directions, flipping and turning, expressing its frenetic energy and

exuberance.<sup>765</sup> It is worth noting that the 'Argument' and 'Flirt' poems draw on the same lexicon ('Argument 2' includes all three words: 'yes', 'no', and 'maybe'). Yet, with the aid of the visual presentation and the interpretative clues provided by the titles, Waber communicates with a minimum of means.

David Knoebel's *Click Poetry*<sup>766</sup> displays variety in the activity required of (or denied) the reader. Knoebel's work is especially relevant here because much (though not all) of it qualifies as Minimalist. Some of Knoebel's 'Words' poems were inspired by reading Richard Kostelanetz. With 'Antonymy Lessons', one may choose a number (1, 2, or 3), after which a pair of antonyms, such as 'female' and 'male', are presented. The antonyms are then replaced by the words immediately following them in the dictionary, so that the next pairs are 'feminine /malediction', 'feminism / malefactor', and so on.

Knoebel's 'Click Poems' are the most markedly Minimalist in the collection. These poems may 'test the limits of poetic brevity', but they also make use of more than one sensory dimension. They consist of three elements or 'lines', the first two of which are visually presented. The last is rendered sonically by a man's voice. The first line of each serves as the link via which one accesses the rest of the poem. Press on 'I wake', and the words 'you sleep' appear, followed by a voice intoning 'two dreams'. 'Two clocks' leads to 'ticking', but, as the voice tells us, 'not in time'. 'Corkboard/thumbtacks/constellation' goes another poem. The essentials of a living human being are delineated in 'Thought/breath/heartbeat'. The wastefulness of indecision is expressed in 'Can't say yes/can't say no/time passes'. 'So fast/what happened?' begins one poem, and here the vocal element is not precisely a word. It may be 'huh?', an exclamation

<sup>765</sup> Dan Waber, *Strings*, at *Vispo*, <http://www.vispo.com/guests/DanWaber/index.html>.

<sup>766</sup> David Knoebel, *Click Poetry*, <http://home.ptd.net/~clkpoet/maincont.html>.

repeating the question in the second line, but it is repeated so quickly ('so fast'), that it becomes only an approximation of the sound of that word. At '3AM.', someone is 'awake again', a situation he finds 'tiresome'. 'At forty-seven' there is somehow 'less chest' and 'more belly'. No doubt we will all recognise 'Stuff/piling up/everywhere'.

A crucial issue with these poems is the relationship between the spoken and written elements. The sequence of the lines is fixed, perhaps more rigidly so than with traditionally printed poetry, for there one has the option of reading lines out of order. Here, in order to access the poem at all, one must submit to the order determined by the poet. Furthermore, the 'voice' of the poet is literally audible (assuming it is he doing the reading). David Markson would no doubt be pleased by such an increase in authorial control, as well as the personal touch afforded by the sound of the poet's own voice.

The final poem I want to discuss is also visual in nature, a one-character poem by jwcurry reproduced in Grumman's essay 'Mnmlst Poetry'. As Grumman points out, it 'charmingly turns a standard, thoroughly un-unique letter I into the very essence of individuality by giving it a thumbprint'. Its formal simplicity is of the visual as well as the literary kind. It not only speaks of individuality, but it also addresses itself directly to the reader. It is an expression of the author's identity given a visual and orthographic form that allows him to present himself to his readers. If we agree with Markson about what is essential to literature, this poem has it, and little, if anything, else. It is therefore purely Minimalist. I began this thesis with a reproduction of a Saroyan poem that approximated the first letter of the word 'Minimalism'. With the idea that the work I have done here represents a crucial beginning in the study of Minimalism in American literature, and that

there is a great deal more to do, I end with jwcurry's poem as a continuation, the second letter of the word:



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*'Primary Texts' includes individual works and texts that contain individual works that I have used as examples of Minimalist literature. It also includes critical writings by the main authors in this thesis that I have drawn on in order to explain their Minimalist principles and practices. 'Secondary Texts' includes all others.*

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